

# MARK NEVILLE

## Fancy Pictures

MOUNT STUART  
ISLE OF BUTE

**Exhibition:** 11 May – 30 September 2008

**Artist Talk:** 11 May, 3pm

**Opening Hours:**

Visitor Centre, gallery & gardens open 10am – 6pm daily

House open 3pm – 5pm on day of preview,

thereafter 11am – 5pm Sunday to Friday, and 10am – 2.30pm Saturday only

Last admission to the house 1 ¼ hours prior to closing

Admission free to view visual arts exhibitions

Mark Neville is interested in subverting genres within film-making and photography, and examining how lens-based images generally are disseminated and interpreted according to context, class, and politics. Author David Company has described the work as 'conceptual documentary'.

Within this conceptual framework, Neville makes moving and still images that are beautiful and challenging. He often employs intricate, specially designed flash and light systems, and the resulting films and images are a precise mixture of the constructed and the natural. The artist works with his own ultra high-speed film cameras, equipment normally used in scientific research, and in wildlife film-making.

His images seem to reflect a natural scene or state, but they employ techniques that paradoxically heighten the sense of the artificial, and make dramatic comment on the way in which film serves a social, symbolic, or metaphorical function.

The exhibition consists of a new 16mm film, and an audio-slide installation of still photographic work, each shown on continuous loop in two locations within the Mount Stuart Visitor Centre, and a group of four photographic prints in the main House.

All the works are the result of an intense and meticulously considered intervention by Neville on the Isle of Bute over a period of months. The subject of his inquiry thus becomes as much about that journey as an extended, elaborate performance, as it does about the nature of film and photographic representation.

One question that seems to be asked continuously by the pieces in the show is: Who is the audience? Is it the farmers of Bute who feature in the work, the patron of the piece, or the artworld?

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## **The Artist:**

Mark Neville is a British artist whose recent group exhibitions include 'A Century of Artists' Film in Britain (Tate Britain, 2004), 'What Makes You and I Different' (Tramway, 2006), and 'Local Stories' (Modern Art Oxford, 2006). Solo exhibitions include 'The Jump Films' (Street Level Glasgow, 2006), 'The Port Glasgow Book Project' (Dick Institute Kilmarnock, 2006) and 'Animal Architecture' (Hunterian Museum, Glasgow). He is also known for his 'Port Glasgow' book, a sumptuous hardback book of social documentary images of the town. The book was exclusively distributed, free of charge, to each of the 8000 households in the Port by the local boys football team.

Neville's work, which has repeatedly explored the role of film and photography in contemporary art, has gained increasing recognition on an international platform over recent months. This is reflected in a nomination for the Deutsche Borse Photography Award 2008, for his outstanding contribution to the medium of photography in Europe over the past year. Recent film work, including 'The Moth and the Lamp', commissioned by the Kunsthalle Bern, led to a residency in Dusseldorf between August and November 2007 as a guest of the State of North Rhine Westphalia. In May 2008, two large scale photographs will be presented in the exhibition 'Parrworld', at Haus Der Kunst, Munich, and the artist's work is currently discussed in the prestigious American photographic periodical, 'Witness', published by Nazraeli Press. Further text information can be found at [www.markneville.co.uk](http://www.markneville.co.uk)

## **Mount Stuart Trust:**

Through the visual arts programme, Mount Stuart Trust aims to promote and facilitate interest in the contemporary visual arts and bring exhibitions of international standard to Bute and Argyll. To create potential for a wider audience and new perspective, the trust utilizes the context of Mount Stuart and the island of Bute as an exciting opportunity for public artwork and provides inclusive educational opportunities.

## List of Works:

### Visitor Centre

#### 'Fancy Pictures' (16mm film loop, 18 min, silent, 2008)

Shot in the grounds of Mount Stuart and on Bute farms, the film '*Fancy Pictures*' features several ultra slow motion sequences of indigenous animal life filmed in front of backdrops taken from Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century portrait paintings in the Dining Room at Mount Stuart. The portraits include works by Sir Joshua Reynolds, Allan Ramsay and Sir Henry Raeburn.

Neville questions the role of landscape in portrait painting, the changing relationships between landowners and animal life, and creature symbolism in film history.

Interwoven is a film that depicts a group of young cygnets feeding and playing, apparently unprotected, until the camera pans out slightly, but dramatically to reveal the powerful presence of the pen (mother). The piece works as a hypnotic meditation on themes of family, and representation of the swan as an ethereal symbol of light, alchemy and self transformation within heraldry and ancient mythology.

The term 'Fancies' was first used in 1737 by art chronicler George Vertue to describe paintings by Mercier of scenes of everyday life, but with elements of imagination, invention or storytelling. Later, the name 'fancy pictures' was given by Sir Joshua Reynolds to the supreme examples of the genre produced by Gainsborough in the decade before his death in 1788, featuring rural life in particular.

The artist says: "*I think wildlife film-making and cinematography is essentially an updated version of British 18th Century landscape painting. Even since Muybridge, I think technological advances in photographic techniques, and how we use them to frame animals, say as much about value systems in Britain today, as a painting by Reynolds tells us about the aristocracy's relationship to the land two hundred years ago. I decided to make this connection using backdrops, so that the wildlife action in the foreground would seem almost like an elegant graffiti*"

## **'Tula Fancies' (audio-slide installation, looped, 14min, 2008)**

Neville's photographs of rural life on Bute reference Old Master painting, scientific imagery, wildlife books, Soviet pictorial types of the 1920's, editorial, social documentary, and fashion photography. The slide projected images collectively suggest that there is a mystical, religious relationship between animal life and the island community, present in the reality of rural life, but also evident throughout the art and craft works commissioned for centuries in Mount Stuart itself. The variety of photographic genres Neville employs works to undermine the notion of a unified, authentic, social documentary vision, in favour of a fluctuating depiction of identity.

The title of the work refers both to the 18th century term in British painting, 'fancies', designating imaginative scenes of quotidian rural life, but also to Tula, an agricultural region in Russia.

Neville approached the taking of each image on Bute as if he were imagining a document of the Soviet Union, searching for faces, landscapes, and scenes that seemed to resonate with his knowledge of existing imagery found both in social documentary photographs and Russian Cinema.

Further investigating the validity of this comparison, the artist then presented twenty of the images to a head boy and head girl at local school Rothesay Academy, claiming the shots were taken in Tula, and asked them to make an accompanying soundtrack inspired by mother Russia. The resulting, haunting soundtrack is the work of Megan Alexander and Kerr Slaven, and is inspired by the images and the misinformation about their origin that was provided.

*Neville says: 'I am interested by the way in which social documentary ( and all photography) lies about place, location, and cultural identity, but also in the way it gives up other truths, about dreams, travel, and fantasy. I thought about Russia in the context of this project for lots of reasons: firstly, it has become the cliché destination of every budding (and professional) social documentary photographer. Secondly, I have never been there before, so my imagining of the place is still extremely vivid. Thirdly, given the geographical and cultural distances between Bute and Tula, there still seem to be a huge amount of fertile and lyrical similarities that can be drawn up. Both British and Russian societies were based upon*

*a feudal system. We like to think that life here is more transparent than in Russia, but the conditions, role and position of the farming communities in relation to their respective governments is remarkably similar, and distinctively difficult. Lastly, Tula is home to the famous Tula accordion, and I thought it interesting that this instrument should also have a powerful home in Scotland. Ultimately though, the association is meant to be ambiguous, so another viewer might well make very different social or poetic connections.'*

## **House**

### **'Photographs for the House' (group of four framed prints, 2008)**

'Goat Pedicure' (silver gelatin fibre print, 64cm x 75cm, 2008)

'Mr and Mrs Curry' (cibachrome print, 75cm x 85cm, 2008)

'Supper' (c-type print, 75cm x 85cm, 2008)

'Newborn Lamb' (c-type print, 75cm x 85cm, 2008)

Neville has introduced into the House four of his photographic portraits of people and places from the Isle, grouped together: They seem at first glance to be unrelated social documents. Further investigation reveals subtle and contradictory references both to the history of photography and to painting.

Neville says: "*Their positioning within the House acts to question the role of social documentary photography, both its relation to context and dissemination, and how it at once celebrates and manipulates its subjects. The images reference the House's relationship to painting sometimes through the poses of its subjects, which may seem to echo Gainsborough's 'Mr and Mrs. Andrews', or sometimes through the lighting, which might quote Caravaggio's 'Supper at Emmaus'. However, they simultaneously also refer to the impulse in 1920's social documentary photography, later common in Soviet pictorial types, to orchestrate its subjects into stylized compositions that glorify the relationship between people and the land. The suggestion being, that it is people, not machines, that are the source of a country's wealth. This message is counterbalanced with the contradictory references to painting genres which reinforce the idea that power is a result of land ownership, and that images should foremost be aesthetically pleasing in order to communicate. I hope the result is ambiguous.*"

**MARK NEVILLE WOULD LIKE TO THANK, IN NO PARTICULAR ORDER...**

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I would like to especially thank all those who, despite giving generously of their time, advice, and support, did not appear in this, by its very nature, limited and highly subjective selection of the numerous images taken.

There may be an opportunity in the future to produce a publication which features a broader and more representative selection of the photographs. Meanwhile, if I have taken your picture, and I have not already sent you a copy, please do e-mail me on [info@markneville.co.uk](mailto:info@markneville.co.uk)