

Mark Neville, 'Fancy Pictures' Mount Stuart, Isle of Bute, Scotland

'Fancy Pictures' is the result of Mark Neville's year-long residency at Mount Stuart, the seat of one of Britain's most affluent and historically influential families. Commissioned as part of the visual arts programme curated by Sophie Crichton-Stuart, the sister of the current Marquis of Bute, the project inevitably gives rise to thoughts relating to contemporary and historical concepts of arts patronage.

A synthesis of historical and more recent social and artistic concerns, the exhibition consists of an audio-slide installation, *Tula Fancies*, and a 16mm film, *Fancy Pictures*, both shown at the Mount Stuart Visitors' Centre, and four photographs (images that also appear in the slide work) sited in the master bedroom of the stately home. Neville has utilised film and photography to examine the complex relationships enacted between Bute's human and animal populations, and treads a sensitive line between engaging in an explicit class critique and an appreciative examination of the necessarily reciprocal relationship between the islanders and the landowners up at the big house.

Neville's experience of working with communities, a skill demonstrated by 2004's Port Glasgow Project that resulted in a photobook, has enabled him to win his way into the heart of the island's community. The success of his efforts was visible at the exhibition's opening in May, when the number of local people, many of whom had been photographed as part of the project, overwhelmed the usual contingent of art professionals.

Neville seeks to overturn popular assumptions about photographic 'truth', particularly in relation to documentary photography. He has employed a series of strategies to expose the dubious, yet widely accepted, notion of veracious photography, most visibly in the audio-slide installation *Tula Fancies*. Neville decided to photograph Bute as though it was Tula, an agricultural region of Russia that the artist has never visited, seeking out scenes that chimed with his knowledge of Soviet photography and cinema. *Tula Fancies* also features an intermittent soundtrack, featuring Russian-sounding music created by students at the local high school in response to a series of Neville's images of Bute, which the students were told were taken in Tula – a piece of misinformation designed to further highlight the ease of falsification by a supposedly documentary media.

Tula Fancies depicts a quasi-mystical relationship between the people of Bute and their animals, including pets, working animals and the island's wildlife. Through the use of a slide installation, Neville is able to present a structured narrative, to dictate the order in

which the photographs are seen, and create rhythm and meaning through the repetition of certain human and animal 'characters'. The work's strong conceptual element is complemented by accomplished images that encompass a wide-range of photographic genres including fashion, wildlife and, of course, documentary. Using ultra high-speed camera equipment and film usually reserved for scientific and wildlife photography, alongside a range of specially designed flash and lighting systems, Neville's images exhibit an astonishing range of heightened effects. An elevated shot of a farmyard full of chickens, goats and other animals racing towards a trough is illuminated by an other-worldly glow reminiscent of the cinematic effects achieved by Gregory Crewdson. Meanwhile, a portrait of a girl in her bedroom, with a cat outside the window carrying a mouse in its mouth, seems too effortless and fortuitous to have occurred without the direction of the photographer, yet also strangely spontaneous and convincing. A delicate image of a small bird captured taking off from its perch on the edge of a coffee mug, featuring the Bute family crest, similarly seems too good to be true – yet here it is. Neville continuously challenges us to break our 'suspension of disbelief', but the images remain seductive nonetheless.

Leaving Russian influences behind, the film *Fancy Pictures* is inspired by eighteenth century paintings of everyday rural life known as 'Fancies' (such an influence is similarly referenced by the title *Tula Fancies*). Constructed from slow motion footage of the island's indigenous animals taken with an ultra high-speed camera, the film captures every shake and shiver, from a seagull's wing to the mucus-sodden body of a newborn lamb. The film's various backdrops feature the lower portions of noted family portraits at Mount Stuart by luminary painters such as Reynolds, Ramsay and Raeburn. Neville juxtaposes the expensively clad legs and feet of Bute's historic landowners with their living animal tenants, with a knowing nod to heraldic symbolism. While less conceptually laden than the previous piece, this film again seeks to draw out connections between these aristocratic patrons and their subjects – something that previous Mount Stuart commissions rarely seem to have focused upon. 'Fancy Pictures' links the rarefied world of the aristocracy to the apparent realities of the lives of the tenants, both human and animal, on their estates but the exhibition's conceptual scope reaches far beyond the confines of this small island.

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