MATRIX *Sean O'Hagan*

Since its inception, photography has attracted those who see the everyday, each in their different ways, with a scientific, almost forensic, detachment. Think of Eadweard Muybridge walking men and running horses, Karl Blossfeldt's studies of flora and fauna, August Sander's austere portraits of ordinary Germans, Bernd and Hilla Becher's industrial water towers, Lewis Baltz's nondescript buildings, Andreas Gursky's monumental apartments and trading floors…

Alongside this adherence to formal rigour, photography, by its very nature – an instant captured in an instant - has, until relatively recently at least, been in thrall to what Henri Cartier-Bresson called "the decisive moment". To this end, photographers have gone out into the world in order to find a picture in which everything – light, shadow, movement, stillness, composition, instinct, craft – converges, allowing the viewer to see a moment frozen forever in time, a moment that they could never see otherwise in the rush and tumble of their daily lives. A great photograph *heightens* that moment, makes it luminous, renders the everyday mysterious, the quotidian transcendent.

Andrew Catlin is a photographer with a scientific eye. He is obsessive, meticulous and rigorous. In his Matrix series, however, he has somehow merged the two approaches outlined above: the rigorously formal with the luminously observational. Whereas the likes of Blossfeldt and the Bechers created visual typologies, arranging plants and industrial water towers respectively in grids that echo the natural and man-made sameness of their subjects, Catlin has used the grid format to render a series of what he calls "critical" moments. The resulting images are both formally detached and acutely observational, ordered yet intimate. Their intimacy is amplified by the cumulative power of each arrangement of critical moments into a matrix of observation.

"I was trained as a scientist; an objective observer, " Catlin once said, "With photography I embrace and offset this discipline, using it as justification to be completely subjective and to study in a different and more subtle way."

Photography as a form of study. It's an interesting idea. It suggests that looking though a camera can be an act of deep contemplation as well as acute observation. You can sense this convergence of almost Zen-like calmness and scientific rigour in the Matrix series. From a fixed viewpoint, Catlin observes people passing, standing still, waiting, interacting or not. The backdrop remains static and unchanging, yet the atmosphere – human and tonal - of each image is subtly different. In one matrix, entitled *Charing Cross Busker*, the eye is initially drawn to the opaque green, almost underwater, colour tone and to the repeated perspective as well as the angles and curves of the subterranean tunnel. People appear in silhouette, approaching or receding into the frame. The busker is almost an incidental detail, both to the passers-by and to the viewer, though as we study the images more closely, he is the lone figure at the beginning and the end of the sequence as well as twice throughout. The matrix seems to create its own symmetry.

Throughout the Matrix series, a single figure is often the locus for the unfolding narrative. In an early matrix, *The Popular Boy*, the subject of the title strolls along the beach, four girls in his wake, oblivious to the activity unfolding around them. In *Girl in Green*, she waits by a pillar, while the world goes past her, then walks, moment by moment, into and out of the frame. As a style evolves, the composite compositions become more abstract and geometric: *Pompidou* is a shifting arrangement of legs walking thought light; in the intriguingly-titled *Helsinki Jacob Dahlgren Ribbons,* vertical stripes of colour are repeated, then disrupted by a tentative adult and a playful child. The result is a Bridget Riley painting rudely interrupted.

"The Matrix Series explores rhythm, space and time to provide a unique way to see." elaborates Catlin, "Each is a collection of moments, separately composed but directly connected." The notion of rhythm is, I think, crucially important here. A rhythm, is a way of measuring time in music, and there is something musical in these matrixes, a minimalist set of repetitions and variations that Steve Reich or Philip Glass might instinctively recognise.

"The true content of a photograph is invisible, for it derives from a play, not with form, but with time." John Berger wrote in *The Look of Things*, " One might argue that photography is as close to music as to painting. . . a photograph bears witness to a human choice being exercised. This choice is not between photographing x and y: but between photographing at x moment or at y moment."

In this instance, though, other equally crucial choices have had to be made as well: which images to choose as individual parts of the bigger picture, as moments in the sequential narrative. This, perhaps, is where Andrew Catlin's compositional skill comes into play, part scientific, part musical, part photographic. He has created something both hybrid and singular: time suspended, time passing, time measured in still, unfolding moments. Time arranged in mathematical rhythm, in musical sequence, in critical moments. Andrew Catlin is a photographer with a scientific eye. He is obsessive, meticulous and rigorous, but also a quiet, unobtrusive observer of the everyday sublime. It shines brightly though his big pictures.