

Marianne Engel's studio visually describes the cognitive shift in her photographic practice between a factual, scientific line of investigation and a mercurial sense of make believe. The curious mix of natural and inorganic matter, carefully positioned on shelves and borrowed surfaces, appears to have been curated with a very specific eye. Whitewashed and well organised, the room oscillates between the different demands of this practically clinical and imaginatively experimental workspace as if it is undecided of its purpose.

Similarly, Engel's photographs cannot be neatly categorised within contemporary art practices or the annals of art history. Look once and you might mistake some of them for the kind of well-executed stills proffered by 'National Geographic' or, at a push, a vocationally-focused photography magazine. Look again to gain entry into an illusory netherworld that may allude to film, literature or science but which is definitely of an artist's making.

Engel's works easily fit the two definitions of the uncanny: they are both otherworldly and aesthetically arresting. She spends her time capturing elements of the natural and urban landscape that everyday mortals are unable to see, tapping into different modes of cultural fantasy. Individual photographs have prompted comparison with contemporary filmmakers who deal with the preternatural, such as David Lynch or Spike Jonze; but her perversely styled natural wonders speak equally of B-movie fiction as Grimm's 'Fairy Tales'. Engel takes the majority of her photos at night. She is quite literally a nightwalker, researching and capturing imagery for her disquieting catalogue. This implies rather more sinister intentions than those that fuel her production, though the staged sense of drama and the nocturnal nature of her projects certainly point to premeditation and peculiarity – words often used in the description of less savoury types. Engel, in person, is an extraordinary character.

Formerly a biochemist and now an artist, the qualities that individually make her unique in combination position her perilously near familiar and inaccurate adjectives that orbit creativity (artistic, eccentric, outsider).

As much as Engel's images are characterised by a sense of childlike wonder, they are not conceptually or formally naïve. Woodland glades and toadstools provide opportunity for temporary flights of fancy but certain details (the light in which they are bathed or their high-gloss production) force us to return to the issue of how the image has been made. Engel may re-present the real as if it were nothing more than a happy photographic accident or a figment of our imagination but her subjects have been framed with the utmost compositional care. The theoretical territory and constructional devices she is experimenting with (be it the sublime or the abject; still life or the landscape; painting or performance) are familiar but Engel is evermore subtly combining these elements and composing images that are very much her own.

Engel is still enchanted by the possibilities of photography. There is no ironic sense of reference to the history of the medium in these works that so often exists in contemporary image making. The only evident forms of self or art reference have been earnestly arranged or are alluded to – like the historical nod of the fellow to the master imitating through the process of learning. Engel's 2003 series of self-portraits are very playful. Toying with double exposure as a pictorial device she often appears multiple times within each image: as if during a certain hour of the night, or in a particular place one might assume the ability to self-replicate. Sometimes she appears caught in headlights, other times lurking with intent but always in a rather eerie light achieved through her (now characteristic) use of torches,

## *Nightwalker* —

Rebecca Geldard follows  
photographer Marianne  
Engel on a pictorial escape  
lane to and from reality

flashlights and the residual natural light at dawn or dusk. The obvious experimental aesthetic of these images gives them a charming, almost amateur feel which, against the rest of Engel's back catalogue, feels like an interpretive ruse.

The rural landscape provides endless information and inspiration for Engel. Liquids ooze, seep and spill from her 'natural' world as if it has been violated – these are no dreamscapes from Elfville. They might signify some kind of ecological warning, or folklore symbolism, but feel dredged from the darker side of the human psyche. Fungal slime coats the decomposing forest floor like dank doilies that might have been dropped from the trees by large arachnids. Beyond the woods lumps appear in the sand as if a gnarly-backed green life form is about to erupt from the shoreline. Though obviously static, some of the more natural history oriented images appear as if they could suddenly whirr into life – fast-forwarding or replaying the process of decay in reverse. The bluish milky torrents of a strangely obscene waterfall appear all the more surreal in stasis, their unspeakable fluid tendrils thrusting through the dark green pool below.

The forces of nature are not always revealed through Engel's lens in such a toxic light. A very simple 2006 image of startling viridian grass against a deep magenta night sky characterises her ability to expose the rift between the sublime and the everyday. In choosing to re-frame such an abundant form of natural growth, Engel allows us to forge our own associative path through the work, while basking unashamedly in a brief moment of beauty. It is like learning something extraordinary about someone you thought you knew.

But what of the creatures that might dwell in these habitats? Mostly the presence of others, whether animal, human, real or spectral, is alluded to through

the suggestive powers of these imaginative settings. But there is a growing bestiary section within this curious photographic library. *Cat* may have been photographed by Engel in 2005, but likely shuffled off this mortal coil sometime before. Curled as if permanently asleep, this feline corpse, thanks to its current dead status and Engel's unwavering scientific eye, feels more specimen than animal. Shrouded in unexplained gloom, its pale skin and bones catch the light like unearthed loot or crunchy cooked sardine skeletons glinting organically from the tin. Despite appearances, *Harry* – a glorious white owl – is very much alive. Portrayed in different moods, whether 'baffled' or 'noble', his perfect form (like a boy licked into physical order before the school photo) is imbued with a stillness that leads you to believe he could be stuffed. Perched on a rock, the amorphous dark space behind him is not the back wall of museum diorama afterlife, but the concrete prison of captivity.

One image that particularly stands out from the rest is *Shadow House*, a scruffy suburban dwelling documented in 2004. Here Engel re-presents the real as if shrink-wrapped in a synthetic film. This skin between the viewer and the image is more reminiscent of a painterly as opposed to photographic guise. The lurid tension of hyperreality owes as much to Chuck Close as Richard Billingham. Home in this context sits representationally between haven and harbinger of horror film doom: a beacon of urban hope in the darkness or a man-made trap. Just because there is light, though, does not mean you will be safe. The darkness, whether thick like tar, arriving or receding with the advent of night or day, is a consistent force defining Engel's pictorial escape lane to and from reality. It can signify voodoo magic, a contemporary sense of menace or cosmological mystery, but, as Engel reminds us, it is the stuff from which we emerge and will undoubtedly return to.

Captions —

- Page 64—Marianne Engel, *GLA*, 2006
- Page 65—Marianne Engel, *Grass 06*, 2006
- Page 66—Marianne Engel, *Harry Baffled*, 2006
- Page 67—Marianne Engel, *Slime Mould*, 2006
- Page 68—Marianne Engel, *Shadow House*, 2004