

Aidan McNeill's CAST

Text by Dan Cox

In *CAST* McNeill takes us behind the curtains of musical theatre's most extravagant fictions to document a very different kind of production.

In a series of large scale photographic works, McNeill composes images of deep, unbounded blues, muted oranges and swirling fogs. Referencing both the Romantic tradition, and the romance of the theatre, the play of light and shadow occasionally veil the presence – or perhaps residual trace - of an anonymous protagonist. As we move from image to image, McNeill seems to frame a narrative of creation and the self in worlds that, at first glance, cascade toward the Sublime.

However, undermining this initial idealism are the material traces of the theatrical apparatus. As the expansive space suggested by the photographic image gives way to the enclosed space of the stage, prop tape, scratches and lines of trapdoors reveal themselves as the components of carefully contrived action. As questions of individuality are subordinated to an understanding of the whole, the self becomes an actor whose destiny we are left to interpret in the signs of performance suspended between potentiality and realisation.

Complementing and complicating her photographic work, McNeill also presents *Performance 349*: a video installation recorded from the live feed of a Musical Director conducting the orchestra of a major West End Musical. Contrasting with the directors impassioned gestures, the film is sound-tracked by a monotone stream of letters and numbers as the Deputy Stage Manager calmly calls into action an intricate pattern of lighting and visual effects that recreate the drama on stage.

While the audience – whom we see in the background – are confronted by objects of consumption and spectacle, we are asked to interpret the construction of the drama itself. Nevertheless, this position is not yet a privileged one. As the Musical Director controls the action onstage, the disjunction of visual and oral codes prevents us from understanding the complex and systematic collaboration taking place out of shot.

Simultaneously implicated in and alienated from the performance, we are asked to reflect both upon the position of the audience in relation to this performance and our own place in relation to the film. In commenting on the theatre, McNeill also suggests that we address the conditions that structure the reception of her own work. From this new perspective the photographic images reveal yet another layer as we become aware of our own role as spectators in a game of placement, manipulation and control – suggesting, finally, that behind the complex play of appearance and reality lies a drama as political as it is metaphysical.