



## Something Old, Something New

### Caroline McQuarrie's Reasons for Silence

MARK BOLLAND

'These images are about trying to escape the loudness that we live with every day,' explains Caroline McQuarrie in a conversation with Deidra Sullivan that accompanied her recent exhibition at Toi Poneke Gallery. This small statement of intent perfectly encapsulates both the work on display and its relationship to a predominant culture that is largely loud, brash, unsubtle and attention seeking. This loudness, then, does not solely refer to volume. Equally these characteristics are not just symptomatic of everyday urban or suburban living, but also of much recent art. They are also emblematic of our culture in general. McQuarrie, like other artists who engage with craftwork, history, and other similarly apparently anti-modern ideas, succeeds in finding

good reason to get away from the noise.

Escaping the loudness, McQuarrie explores memory, domesticity, belonging and the values of handmade things. To do this, she makes use of cyanotype, a photographic process which dates from the medium's infancy in the 1840s, printed in striking blue monochrome onto second-hand textile artefacts. These materials, combined with the emptiness and quietness of the images, might imply a nostalgia for quieter times, long since past. However, these works actually point us to the small moments of silence that can be found in the present. The pauses for thought and daydream moments when both the present and the past escape us momentarily, are McQuarrie's 'reasons for silence'.

Printing cyanotypes onto textiles is a long process. The photograph is made, appropriately enough, on an



(opposite) CAROLINE McQUARRIE *The Gardener's Scar* 2010  
Cyanotype photographic print on recycled cotton tablecloth &  
cotton thread, 885 x 950 mm.

(below) CAROLINE McQUARRIE *Reasons for Silence III* 2010  
Cyanotype photographic print on recycled cotton tablecloth &  
wool, 2500 x 1380 mm.

(right) CAROLINE McQUARRIE

*I tried to fake it but I got found out*—detail 2010

Cyanotype photographic print on set of six recycled linen napkins &  
cotton thread, 890 x 610 mm.

old camera, using another antiquated technology—  
colour negative film. It is then scanned and inverted,  
then a new negative is made and printed onto the  
chosen textile via an emulsion that has been mixed  
by hand and painted onto the material. Like the work  
itself, this protracted process is in stark contrast to our  
culture of immediate images and instant gratification.  
In equally stark contrast to commercially printed  
photographs on canvas or other materials, which  
lamefully simulate the look of the handmade artefact,  
McQuarrie's canvases are actually old—second-hand  
tablecloths, placemats, and so on from the 1940s  
and 1950s. These are often quite ornate and hand-  
embroidered and sometimes augmented by the artist,  
in a manner that is appropriate to both the material  
and the images.

These textiles already have a history, and have  
already had one life. They were discarded and have  
been resurrected by the artist from their op-shop  
graves and reincarnated as the setting for various  
scenes that might be outtakes from anyone's family  
album: a moment after a Christmas present has been  
unwrapped and left under the tree; a recently vacated  
sandpit; a portrait in which the subject's head has been  
cut off.

As we explore the exhibition we are confronted,  
again and again with empty, perhaps recently vacated  
spaces. Rooms and gardens devoid of presence, or  
other domesticated spaces, such as a deserted picnic  
by a lake, an empty table in an anonymous yard, and



an abandoned wheelbarrow in a garden. There are  
also small domestic still-lives—a jug and some wool  
on a dresser, some boots on a porch, a pile of logs,  
and so on. These pictures are brought together in  
groups often using a set of tablemats or napkins, or as  
diptychs on tablecloths, and then given evocative and  
elusive titles like *I tried to fake it but I got found out*; *The  
Gardener's scar* and *Reasons for Silence*.

These vacated spaces make for appropriately quiet  
images, and the source of their quietness also gives  
them a strange relationship to time. Most photographs  
have a very apparent specific moment to which they  
are tied—the moment the shutter clicked—and this  
is intrinsic to our reading of them. These pictures,  
though, lack any indication as to their moment of  
genesis and could have been made at any point in  
the last 50 or 60 years or so. We can place them as  
belonging to a time *after* the textiles they are printed  
on were made, but there is little or nothing to tell us





(below & right) CAROLINE McQUARRIE  
*I tried to fake it but I got found out*—detail 2010  
 Cyanotype photographic print on set of six recycled linen napkins &  
 cotton thread, 890 x 610 mm.

that these photographs were taken in the last three years. This has a destabilising effect on the viewer—the more we look, the less we seem to know.

The prevalence of domestic and domesticated spaces in McQuarrie's pictures and their coupling with the household materials they're printed on suggest that home and its immediate surroundings are where she finds, and where we in turn might find, 'reasons for silence'. The silence McQuarrie seeks at home, and in other's homes, is an antidote to the everyday hurly-burly of urban capitalism and so is akin to the Buddhist 'Zen' silence.

In her *A Book of Silence*, Sara Maitland distinguishes between numerous types of silence, including the Buddhist, Quaker and Trappist concepts. Trappist silence is, she observes, 'about discipline', whilst that of the Quakers is a 'listening silence', waiting for the voice from within that is no different from the 'direct voice of God'. For Buddhists, though, Zen silence is a kind of protest against 'the veils of illusion'. 'You are silent in order to escape from the self and the dualisms of the world'.<sup>1</sup> Zen silence is both an escape and a protest. That we might feel the need for a reason to seek it out is indicative of a culture where noise has become default, where TV screens chatter, machines and traffic hum, and adverts shout.

McQuarrie's small silences are like miniature versions of religious retreats, where silence is a positive absence of sound, a place for reflection and peace. We now might think of churches as places of such refuge, especially in cities, but, as Maitland points out, this is a particularly modern phenomenon, a 'Victorian hush'<sup>2</sup> that is also a reaction to our culture of noise. Museums and galleries can also provide this kind of sanctuary space and part of the power of pictures lies in their silence, their need for a whole vocabulary of signs and gestures to signify speech and sounds, and their resulting suggestion that we stand silently in front of them.

McQuarrie's pictures suggest that she has an intuitive understanding of the possibilities for photographs as silent spaces. Cleared of the suggestion of dialogue or rhetoric, her photographs might allow us to develop Maitland's distinction



between noisy art and silent art<sup>3</sup> and apply it to photography. Advertising photography is mostly noisy; so is photojournalism. Art, along with so many other privileges, can allow photography the luxury of quiet. Just as different religions have different silences, so does photography; from the glacial, distanced silence of the cool surveying gaze to the quiet of the small study or pause, which is McQuarrie's speciality.

Like other artists going back to seventeenth-century Holland, McQuarrie uses domestic familiarity to explore more philosophical concerns. Homes may be the notional subject here but these images are not like family photographs: they are not peopled, except for four 'portraits,' that are equally anonymous, literally faceless, and also rather elusive. Unlike family snaps, the purpose and meaning of McQuarrie's photos can elude us. The materials they are printed on provide part of the solution, but perhaps we can find meaning in what is not present: These pictures omit both text and technology, and this is how they achieve their silence and their beauty.

1. Sara Maitland, *A Book of Silence* Granta Books, London 2008, pp. 140-145.

2. *ibid.*, p. 145.

3. *ibid.*, p. 146.

