

The 2010 Deutsche Börse Prize shortlist

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Zoe Leonard's 'TV Wheelbarrow' (2001-6) and Anna Fox's 'Hampshire Village Play' (2003)

People queue up, as they do for any contemporary art activity, to throw brickbats at the Deutsche Börse prize for photography. Too conceptual, I could have done that, too obscure, not obscure enough ... Yet the 2010 shortlist, now on view at the Photographers' Gallery in London ahead of the March 17 announcement of the winner, is hardly controversial stuff. Each of the four photographers is well known, and well published. The brickbats come because the prize is notionally awarded "to the living photographer who has made the most significant contribution in exhibition or publication format to the medium of photography in Europe". "Most significant" is always going to be too big a claim.

Anna Fox was an important member of that very English group of new colour documentary photographers of the 1980s that included the Pauls – Reas, Seawright and Graham (who won this prize last year). She was taught by Martin Parr and her major retrospective book was published in 2007; it seems fair to suppose the nomination for this present prize followed that.

Her interests have narrowed over the years until her ambit now seems to run no further than the village where she lives, with its mildly sinister jokey customs, her friends and family, and the details of her own existence. One series shown here is of the various dead creatures her cats bring into the house. Another consists of photographs of the dinners cooked by her lodger.



'Eleven Blowups #10' (2006) by Sophie Ristelhueber

French photographer Sophie Ristelhueber also had an ample retrospective recently, at the Jeu de Paume in Paris. Ristelhueber is interested in the aftermath of war, on people and on the landscape. She has made famous photographs of scars, although none is on view here. Her "Eleven Blowups" are represented, however: fictional scars on the ground that stand for Everybomb. Ristelhueber makes things up when it suits her. She gives herself licence, in other words, to make her viewers credulous.

As is the way of so many photographers who prefer to be known as artists, Ristelhueber's prints are large, and her references a mite learned. A huge aerial view that could be a military landscape from one of the Gulf wars is named in tribute to Man Ray and Marcel Duchamp's "Elevage de Poussière". But Ristelhueber is also interested in her own history, and other pieces in this selection come from her series *Vulaines*, overblown meditations on her family photographs.

American Zoe Leonard is the third of the artists to have had a recent retrospective show, in Munich this time. She photographs modest shop fronts in a coolly frank manner derived from Atget, and shows them in a tidy grid. She takes an obvious pleasure in the vanishing craft attributes of photography, and her colours are muted compared with those of Anna Fox, who has a predilection for the loud.

She is a photographer (like Walker Evans before her, who dealt with similar subject matter) who includes many words in her pictures. These act as internal captions and slightly overtake the more purely visual elements. A cheap lawyer has a sign offering RAPID DIVORCE, and the bubbles in a barber's window offer, in quick succession, to FADE SENIOR CITIZENS. A nice view of two second-hand televisions in a crummy store has them reflecting the street in which they stand in a grainy black-and-white, even within a colour frame. Another clapped-out old television is ready for transport in a wheelbarrow, cradled in old pink sofa cushions.



'Deconstruction of the Maze Prison' (2009) by Donovan Wylie

Donovan Wylie has not yet had a major retrospective (he was born only in 1971) but he is a member of Magnum, which in terms of visibility amounts to much the same. Wylie has long since given up the raw black-and-white at which he excelled from a very young age but which he never seemed to refine into a language of his own. He now works in a much more deliberate colour style, derived from developments in Germany and the Netherlands, in which the slow accumulation of variations over the course of a series is the point.

Wylie is honoured here for his work on Northern Ireland's Maze Prison, and in one exciting series we see a perimeter wall of the infamous prison gradually disappear as contractors knock it down. Hundreds of prisoners must have stared at the blankness of that corrugated sheeting that once prevented their gaze from travelling. As the wall becomes transparent in successive images, we gather that there was precisely nothing behind it to look at. It's time-lapse

photography parodied, as well as a complex and perhaps wise comment on the politics that brought the prison into being and then took it away again.

I've long since given up second-guessing the Deutsche Börse judges as to who might win – although I acknowledge that I have commented here in my own ascending order of preference.

Deutsche Börse Photography Prize 2010 Photographers' Gallery, London, to April 18.
www.photonet.org.uk.

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