



East London

Clarisse d'Arcimoles

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London

I started to create a black and white photograph in 3D

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Wall Street International

Jarisse d'Arcimoles, Forgotten Tale

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GRANTA

UN-POSSIBLE RETOUR

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WPO World Photography Organisation

A Trip Back in Time with Forget Nostalgia

Forget Nostalgia is a project that aims to bring back old photographs and stories from the past. It features a collection of vintage photos and accompanying text that tells the stories behind them.

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FRAME NEWS SUBSCRIPTIONS STORE

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the guardian

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BBC

In pictures: Up-and-coming photographers

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Forget Nostalgia: A Little Theatre of War

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BLOUINARTINFO

Kickstarter: the Answer to the UK's Art Funding Crisis?

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Culture **Photography**

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Victorian poverty proves pertinent in *Forgotten Tale* at The Photographers' Gallery



Found photograph (photographer unknown) c.1902 East End of London CREDIT: CLARISSE D'ARCIMOLES / BISHOPSGATE INSTITUTE

By **Lowenna Waters**

23 AUGUST 2016 · 8:08AM

For years, artists and writers have been inspired by the destitution of the Victorian poor. Works such as Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist* and Jack of London's *The People of the Abyss* have come to define an era synonymous with slums, street urchins, prostitutes and gangs. Now, one young artist has joined their ranks, tackling the subject in an original and thought-provoking exhibition, *Forgotten Tale*, that opened at London's Photographers' Gallery on Friday. Four years in the making, the work not only makes the Victorian era tangible for contemporary viewers, but also has something pertinent to say about the poverty that still exists in the capital today.



Objects included *Forgotten Tale* CREDIT: CLARISSE D'ARCIMOLES / THE PHOTOGRAPHERS' GALLERY

"I always wanted to enter into a black and white photograph. And now I've done it," exclaims Clarisse d'Arcimoles. After moving to London from her native France in 2005 to pursue a Set Design for Performance degree at Central Saint Martin's, d'Arcimoles became fascinated by photography, and completed a postgraduate degree in the subject.

Since then, she has cleverly blended the two disciplines to illustrate photography's power to recreate memories in playful and nostalgic artworks. For example, in *UnPossible Retour* (2011) she re-staged old family photographs 20 years later, subtly highlighting the passing of time while with *Rise and Fall* (2012), she recreated a flat in a demolished post-war apartment block. Through revisiting the past, she forces us to reassess the present anew, making her one of 2016's most exciting emerging talents.



Installation shot CREDIT: CLARISSE D'ARCIMOLES /THE PHOTOGRAPHERS' GALLERY

Fittingly, we meet at a café in Spitalfields Market, just yards from the East End slum that inspired the whole project. "Forgotten Tale was inspired by a photograph of a poverty-stricken mother and her six barefoot and grubby children making hairbrushes in a common lodging room in Spitalfields, one of London's most notorious Victorian slums," she explains, sipping her Americano. "Taken in 1902, just months after Queen Victoria died and Edward VII was coronated, the picture shows hardship, but also bravery and familial tenderness." The final work is a human scale, black and white recreation of the poorly furnished common lodging room featured in the photograph - imagine a theatre or film set - with a bed, fireplace, table, chairs, gas light fittings and a cupboard.

"It was archaeological in a way. Every object they had, I had to find it, or make it if I couldn't find it," she explains. "It was a real challenge because on top of that, every object then had to be made to look black and white. A kettle, for example, needs the correct texture, which requires adding chalk, graphite and ink to the paint. It's really not a simple process!"



The detail of the recreation is astounding. A collection of porcelain trinkets scatters the mantelpiece, copper coins are painted graphite grey, horsehair on the table for the brushes is sepia-silver toned, and even the wallpaper is bleached out in sections to mirror the uneven exposure of the original picture. "I looked at the picture millions of times, and I always found new details, new object that I hadn't noticed before," she explains.

D'Arcimoles discovered the photograph in the Bishopsgate Institute archive, also in east London, in 2011. Since then, she's spent time working on other projects while fundraising and meticulously collecting objects from car boot sales, antique stores and eBay. "I was drawn to the image for a number of reasons," she says. "Having lived in east London since I moved to the city in 2005, I was naturally interested in the Spitalfields' history. It has always been an area of immigration. At that time it was Italian and Irish, then in the Sixties Bangladeshi and Russian. People have always come here to make a new life, for a new beginning."



Installation shot CREDIT: CLARISSE D'ARCIMOLÉS /THE PHOTOGRAPHERS' GALLERY

More intriguingly, the image held secrets. "I know the year and the location that the photograph was taken in, but apart from that everything is a mystery. That's why I called the project *Forgotten Tale* – I started inventing a story about the family. Where is the father? Perhaps he is absent, or perhaps he was killed in the Boer War, we'll never know for certain."

For Clarisse, recreating a Victorian photograph in the present gives it new meaning. "It reminds people how gloomy, bleak and hard life was in the East End. Yes the picture is a documentation of hardship, poverty and labour, but it also highlights their brave determination to survive and love. Despite the fact her children don't have shoes, the mother's working really hard to make it. Sadly, we'll never know if she did make it in the end."



Forgotten Tale CREDIT: CLARISSE D'ARCIMOLÉS /THE PHOTOGRAPHERS' GALLERY

THE PHOTOGRAPHERS' GALLERY

CLARISSE D'ARCIMOLES Q&A

Artist interview



[ENLARGE IMAGE](#)

INFO

Having just launched her solo exhibition at The Photographers' Gallery, Clarisse d'Arcimoles sits down with Print Sales to discuss her practice and share the process of assembling this ambitious installation which invites the viewer to step into the world of a 19th century photograph.

Could you tell us a little bit about your background?

I studied Set Design for Performance at Central Saint Martins followed by a Postgraduate course in photography. I definitely think my practice marries both my experience with photography and my experience with set design as I am primarily concerned with revisiting old photographs by restaging them in the present. I wouldn't consider myself a photographer in the most traditional sense.

What is it about photography that interests you?

My work has always been inspired by the history of photography or old photographs. I am fascinated by how a photograph can tell a story and how we can travel into the past through an image. In my work I'm using time as a partner because I know that I can't physically go back in time!

Performing for the camera is key to your work, why do you choose to put yourself in the frame?

I really enjoy taking on the persona of other characters and in my series 'Forget Nostalgia' I dress up in Victorian costume and hand tint my face with make-up to replicate the look of hand-tinted photographs of that time. I want to show how the artist can play different roles and draw the audience into the ballet that takes place between camera, photographer and subject.



Are there any other artists working in a similar performative way that you have taken inspiration from?

I am not necessarily inspired by one artist alone, however I am a huge fan of French artist Sophie Calle and the way in which she articulates documentary and performative art. I also take inspiration from sustained relationships, places and history.

Could you explain how you went about assembling *Forgotten Tale*?

From idea to realisation, *Forgotten Tale* has been a long time in the making. It has been one of my biggest artistic challenges, as it required a high level of expertise from different fields of experience. I first spent days hunting through dusty boxes in London archives looking for the right photograph to re-create. I then spent hours planning, sketching and model making. Ebay, car boot sales and antiques fairs were crucial for sourcing the props and furniture. And it took quite a while to secure the funding. Fabricating the set and painting everything black and white was a long and meticulous process which took three months. Chalk paint, charcoal, black ink and even shoe polish were all crucial in creating the atmosphere and feeling of the original photograph.

What excited you most about the installation 'Forgotten Tale'?

As a child, when I looked at old photographs I believed that the world must have been black and white at that time, that colour was yet to be invented! Since then, I have always wanted to step into an old black-and-white photograph. I am glad that I have finally realised my vision of physically stepping into a black and white photograph but also having achieved the ambition of realising a childhood fantasy of a black and white world.

I'm now very excited to share it with the audience for the next five weeks. The installation itself is available for acquisition so I am really hoping to find a good home for it after the show too.

Click [here](#) to find out more about **Forgotten Tale** which will run until 24 Sept.



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[Clarisse d'Arcimoles : Forgotten Tale](#)



Clarisse d'Arcimoles

Forgotten Tale

19.08.16 - 24.09.16

Print Sales at The Photographers' Gallery / London / England

Clarisse d'Arcimoles : Forgotten Tale / Reviewed by Paul Carey-Kent / 13.09.16

French photographer Clarisse d'Arcimoles demonstrated her commitment to the long-planned installation she has completed at The Photographer's Gallery through a four year crowd-funding campaign to raise the funds needed to make it a reality. It takes her practice to another dimension.

D'Arcimoles, who trained in set design before turning to photography, has previously inhabited the past by recreating photographic backdrops and then stepping – suitably suited, coiffured by a period hairdresser, as male or female – into them herself. As a girl, d'Arcimoles persuaded herself that old black and white photographs showed that the world was not then in colour, feeding what proved an ongoing desire to enter the monochrome world as used to be. Victorian scenes feature at The Photographers' Gallery through 14 cabinet cards from the 'Forget Nostalgia' series. She sources an original photograph, builds a set to replicate the background – painting it monochrome, but photographing in colour so that traces of the true process are left visible, rather as in Thomas Demand's worlds of card. Any apparent old-style tinting is achieved by colour paint on the original set-up, not in post-production. It all fits with the conceit of taking literally the instinctive analogue assumption that photographs depict the world as it is. That may sound like an anachronism in the digital world, but on the one hand d'Arcimoles's work is about reimagining the past, and that assumption is an aspect of it; and on the other hand her process can be seen as post-modern too, as the recreation of a photograph refutes the original's claim for indexical veracity.

The photographs are not the main focus here, though, for d'Arcimoles has realised the grander goal of recreating the childishly assumed world itself. Her photographs represent a movement from 3D historic original to 2D photograph to 3D set to new 2D image, which leaves plenty of room for artifice at that third stage: we all know how unreal Hollywood backdrops look outside of the filming process. To show that third stage, then, so that we can step into it requires a far more ambitious scheme than setting up studio props. The photographer's studio merges with a new reality. *Forgotten Tale*, then, replicates the location of a family of mother and children photographed in a common lodging house in Spitalfields in 1902. The inhabitants are not shown, (leaving visitors to play their roles) and the whole walk-in scene is meticulously painted in black and white.

In the 1902 photograph, mother and children are engaged in making hairbrushes. The backdrop is a wallpaper hand-printed by d'Arcimoles. The various pictures on the wall are not photographic re-enactments by d'Arcimoles, but matching originals which she – rather exhaustingly, I imagine – tracked down on e-bay. The reproduction furniture (credit to her carpenter) includes a table with just the right wonkiness of leg. Among the objects are used candles, candle holders, a toy model of a pig on the bed, and all the components of the tedious business of threading the brushes: piles of bristles, the backs of brushes ready to receive them, completed brushes, a chart of their specifications. We might hope that such piecework is itself a thing of the past, but it's actually the one aspect of the photo which is still prevalent, if only illegally or abroad. It also suggests the work required to set up *Forgotten Tale* itself.

Two walls are visible in the original image, which is displayed alongside, so that d'Arcimoles's attention to detail can be tracked and appreciated. The third wall of the installation is more speculative, d'Arcimoles having had to imagine what might have been there: she includes a photograph of the absent husband, shown as a soldier in the uniform of the Boer War, so setting up a possible narrative – or forgotten tale – which could explain his absence by his death in action. The whole display, then, combines several means of representing the world of 115 years ago: original photographs, d'Arcimoles' apparent recreation of such photographs, her 3D reconstruction of the direct photographic evidence, and her imagined extension of that reconstruction.

Quite apart from drawing, the recreation of a 'monochrome world' is an established contemporary art move: one might point to Mary Reid Kelley, Stan Douglas, Hans Op de Beeck or David Claerbout. The artist who comes closest to d'Arcimoles' approach is Martin Honert – but d'Arcimoles' interest remains distinctive. Many of Honert's sculptures are versions of photographs, but for him it's all about a route to the Proustian recapture of the personal emotions he recalls from times past – sometimes in greyscale (see e.g. *VSG Gruppe*, 2015): the shifting means of representation and their implied ontologies are not foregrounded as they are by d'Arcimoles. She is returning – to unique effect – to a *photographic experience* from her childhood.

– text by [Paul Carey-Kent](#)



Clarisse d'Arcimoles, Found photograph (photographer unknown) c.1902, East End of London, Courtesy of Bishopsgate Institute

© Clarisse d'Arcimoles, courtesy of The Photographers' Gallery

London.

The borough also has the lowest male life expectancy, the capital's second highest unemployment rate and above average homelessness. By inviting viewers to step inside a time past within the frame of a black and white photograph, we're shown how this forgotten tale is concerningly current.

Forgotten Tale by Clarisse d'Arcimoles is on at Print Sales Gallery at The Photographers' Gallery August 19 - September 24.



CLARISSE D'ARCIMOLES

CLARISSE D'ARCIMOLES EXHIBITED AT THE SAATCHI GALLERY

Clarisse d'Arcimoles
Carnaval (My Brother)

2009

Archival Inkjet print

31 x 42.5 cm



Each of these works by Clarisse d'Arcimoles consists of a photograph from her family album and a picture of the same person taken in 2009 in a scene that's been exactly reproduced. "I called this series Un-possible retour, which means 'a possible impossible return'," D'Arcimoles says. "I grew up partly in French Guyana so in the photos I was re-staging, the location sometimes had changed or become inaccessible and the objects and surroundings could not always be found or re-made. But while the people had grown up, aged and changed, I could feel a certain sense of permanence in them. This photograph is my brother at the carnival; to recreate the image I had to repaint the background and find the same costume. I sometimes make the clothing myself, or when it is too complicated to find a similar fabric I ask a tailor. Even if for my family it has been somewhat tiresome to cooperate for these photos, they really enjoyed it."

**Anachronism, Theatricality and the Gesture of Photographing in ‘Forget Nostalgia:
A Little Theatre of Self’ by Clarisse d’Arcimoles**



When I was a child, I convinced myself by looking at old photographs that at the time they had been taken, the world was in black-and-white and that colour did not exist yet but appeared later with the progress of technology. Since then I always wished that I could enter into old black-and-white photographs.

I have long been fascinated by the combination of candid playfulness and scientific experimentation that grounds Clarisse d’Arcimoles’ photographic works. ‘Forget Nostalgia’ (2012) strongly echoes her ‘Un-Possible Retour’ project (2009), where she merged set design and photography to ‘revisit the past by restaging it in the present’. In ‘Forget Nostalgia’, she takes this process to another level, moving away from the personal snapshots that were the source of ‘Un-Possible Retour’ to anonymous photographic portraits from the early ages of English photography. The result stages a series of seemingly nostalgic self-portraits in Victorian and Edwardian costumes. However, looking at ‘Forget Nostalgia’s’ many pictures, I see photography restaging photography, a gesture that is far from nostalgic and inscribes itself in the complex history of photography as technology and art.

Clarisse found the images behind the Forget Nostalgia compositions in her private collection, over the internet and in Tom Phillips and Martin Parr’s postcard collections. These images are digital and printed reproductions of real photographs, produced by a true photographic process rather than photo-mechanically and printed on cards. Initially known as ‘cartes-de-visite’ and ‘cabinet cards’ – depending on their size and orientation – they were standardised for postal distribution as real photo postcards in 1899. The postcards became a very common form in which people received and consumed photographic imagery in the first quarter of the twentieth century. According to Tom Phillips, these postcards, generally sent to relatives and friends, are ‘always in the present, in the newness and actuality of the moment photographed’. They have ‘an uncomfortable directness and unequivocal reality that bar the door against nostalgia’. Real photo postcards testify to a moment in the history of self-representation defined through a given technology. At this time a portrait photographer’s studio was present in every town and village. In the studio customers had a choice of painted scenic backdrops and props, ranging from pastoral and seaside landscapes to the evocation of aristocratic splendour. In larger cities, studios offered theatrical settings and costumes allowing the sitters to indulge in wilder fantasies. With the advent of the car and aeroplane these studios equipped themselves with three-dimensional sketchy simulations to match the aspirations of their customers. By the end of this period ‘not only had everyone become a postcard but almost all had become a photographer’. Through photographic technology, ‘people became visible not only to others but also visible to themselves’.

Almost all of Clarisse’s chosen reference images are monochrome black-and-white portrait photographs of an individual or a group of people. The only colour postcard is a hand-tinted card. Some of the images are occasion portraits and others deal with what we would today call virtual reality (fantasy aeroplanes, studio seas and beaches). One postcard celebrates an un-ironic and unembarrassed patriotic fervour. They represent the intersection of social history with individual life. According to Elizabeth Little these postcards belong to ‘the tradition and visual repertoire of imaging the human being, which can be traced back to the emergence of secular portraiture in the fifteenth century....They are a form of projection of a personal and collective ideal’.

Clarisse recreates these postcards scenes, restaging and reenacting them to photograph again. Upon exhibition, none of the source postcards are presented to us. The original tableaux are re-presented through deliberately anachronistic gestures in the artist's studio. While avoiding artificial light sources to achieve the most authentic physical conditions of early twentieth century photography studios, the scenes are presented with carefully painted grayscale monochrome backdrops, props, accessories and costumes in all shades of grey. Clarisse uses technology that was born long after the time of the postcards – colour film and a 120 mm medium format camera. The negatives were scanned and the images digitally manipulated to perfect the contrast between the grayscale backdrops, props, costumes and colour of the artist's skin, to allow the duplication of herself in a few of the photographs and to maximise the two-dimensional illusion of the postcard. There is something uncannily out-of-place in the rosy flesh of the artist performing her journey through the past in black-and-white. A paradoxical kind of displacement is taking place. 'Forget Nostalgia's' photographs retain the indexicality of the moment photographed – Barthes' noumen, his 'That Has Been' – while proclaiming themselves representations, theatrical fictions through the repetitive photographic capture of the artist acting various roles.

Clarisse's gestures reveal the complexity of the photographic process. Gesture 1: Clarisse reconstructed the black-and-white universe of early photography, reminding us that photographs are theoretical images. In Vilém Flusser's words, they are 'images of concepts arising out of the theory of optics'. Gesture 2: Clarisse, the artist photographer, is the sitter in her compositions. She collaborated with her assistant to set up the camera, manipulating its capabilities in line with her objectives. Clarisse became the 'photographic object' for the camera, merging the intention, cause and meaning of the photograph. This gesture deconstructs what Flusser called the 'photographer/camera's complex', physically separating the photographer from the camera and, revealing the relationship between the camera and its 'functionaries' – another Flusserian term. Gesture 3: The artistic decision of including sections of her studio walls and floor surrounding the staged compositions reminds us that the photograph is not a window but a technical image produced by a complex apparatus. These images are 'surfaces that translate everything into states of things... and entice those receiving them to project this uncoded magic to the world out there'. Gesture 4: The sitter is looking at the camera, turning it into the mechanical audience for her small theatre of the self, drawing us into contemplation of the ballet that takes place between camera, photographer and subject, making us aware of taking another point of view, reminding us of the theatricality of any representation and the constructed character of subjectivity.

'There is no such thing as naïve, non-conceptual photography. Photography is an image of concepts' wrote Vilém Flusser. Clarisse's photographic gestures make visible the relationship between camera, photographer, subject and spectator. Clarisse's photographs are improbable 'informative images' that are the result of systematic manipulation of the possibilities of the camera. These photographs are a translation of the freedom found in playing against the camera and the critical trace of a photography practice akin to a philosophical gesture that questions, once again, the nature of representation and of the art object.

Amélie Mourgue d'Algue

Amélie Mourgue d'Algue is an artist and writer. She graduated from Goldsmiths MFA Art Writing in 2012. She recently published 'Things that Must Be Seen to Be Seen and Other Stories', a collection of essays dealing with the workings of the disciplinary economy of representation and her essay 'Figuring non division' was published by the Art Writers Guild in 'Idioglossia, An Art Writing Glossary'.

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