

**PRINT SALES GALERY
15 SEP-5 NOV 2017**

**THE
PHOTOGRAPHERS'
GALLERY**



**TOM
BUTLER:
DIVIDED
SELF**

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The Bevarkarkmetsmets, 2017 (side 1 and side 2), from Divided Self © Tom Butler Studio

Tom Butler (b.1979, London) uses a background in sculpture and fine art to manifest an interest in manipulating surfaces, re-framing memories and uncovering hidden psyches.

He is best known for his on-going series of original Victorian 'cabinet' cards - featuring formal photographic portraits of men, women and children – which he transforms through precise interventions including hand-painting, gouache application and intricate collage.

By cutting away sections of the original images and adding layers or geometric blocks of colour, Butler draws attention to both the delicate vintage style and texture of the cards, and the generic nature of the sitters and their poses. His interactions re-create each one as a unique and contemporary work of art.

These re-workings express Butler's interest in what he calls 'conspicuous invisibility', where the process of concealment becomes a kind of performance, exposing the personal and psychological affectations of the subjects pictured as well as his own thinking as an artist.

"I use these portraits as psychological clotheshorses to create grotesque and sinister scenarios, enabling me to project thoughts, fears and anxieties in an immediate and direct way and often with a macabre sense of humour." - Tom Butler

BIOGRAPHY

Born London, UK, 1979
Lives Portland, ME & London, UK

EDUCATION

MFA, Sculpture - Slade School of Fine Art, UCL, 2007
BA Fine Art, Sculpture - Chelsea College of Art and Design, University of the Arts, London, 2005
BA History of Art and Design - Winchester School of Art, Southampton University, 2000

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2016 The Hidden, Ogunquit Museum of American Art, ME, USA
2015 Inhabitants: Part 2, VOLTA NY, USA
Inhabitants: Part 1, CHARLIE SMITH LONDON, UK
2014 ONE HUNDRED MISFITS, FIFTY ONE TOO, Antwerp, Belgium
Inner Worlds, Aucosisco Galleries, Portland, ME. USA
2013 Absentees, CHARLIE SMITH LONDON, UK
2012 Curio, Charlie Dutton Gallery, London, UK
2011 Aedas Presents: Tom Butler, Aedas Architects, Birmingham, UK
The Grotesques, Susan Maasch Fine Art, Portland, ME, USA
2010 "I don't know when I'll be home..." Exeter Phoenix, Devon, UK

TEACHING

- 2016 Current Bowdoin College, Visiting Critic, ME, USA
2016 Maine College of Art, Visiting Lecturer, ME, USA
2011-13 The Community Schools at Opportunity Farm and Camden, Art Director and Art Teacher, ME, USA
2010-11 The Community School, Art Teacher and assistant to lead teacher, ME, USA
2010 Maine Media Workshops, teaching assistant to John Isaac and Sean Harris, ME, USA

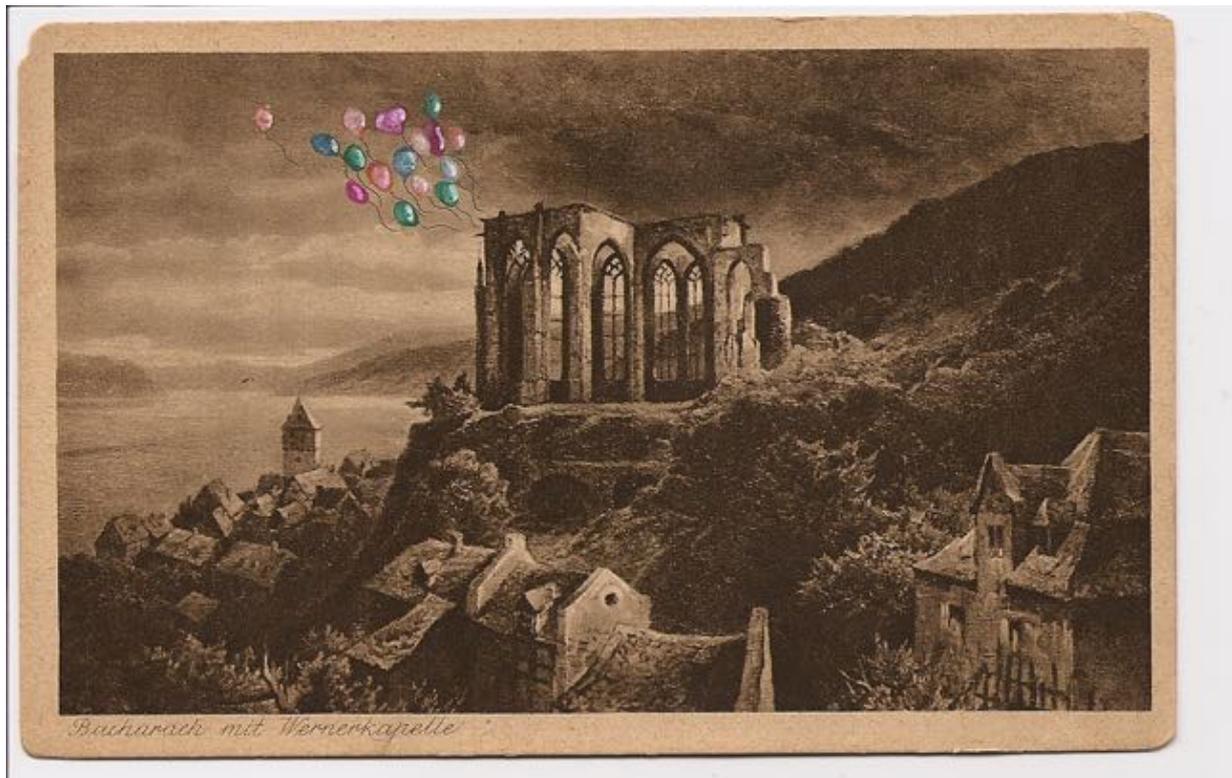
COLLECTIONS

Soho House
Quintessentially
The Caldic Collection, The Netherlands
SØR Rusche Collection, University of Maine Museum of Art, United States
Ogunquit Museum of American Art, ME, United States
Private collections in France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, UK & USA

INTERVIEW WITH TOM BUTLER

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Tom Butler (b.1979, London) collects memories, thresholds and hiding places and attempts to re-manufacture them in visual form. In advance of his solo exhibition in our Print Sales Gallery, Alexandra Olczak interviews Butler about his on-going series of appropriated original Victorian cabinet cards. These unique hand-painted or altered cabinet cards – previously discarded albumen photographs – feature portraits of men and women rendered anonymous by colourful patterns and forms applied in meticulously detailed gouache, or manipulated through intricate and precise collaging. By removing sections of the vintage cards and inserting modern coloured paper or carefully re-ordering them, Butler reinvents his subjects as contemporary works of art.



Über Die Wernerkapelle, Ink on vintage postcard, 2008 © Tom Butler Studio

Alexandra Olczak: Looking broadly at your artistic practice, I can see you use photography both as a primary and secondary medium. You've also previously used found material as the basis of works, such as your vintage postcard series. What drew you to Victorian cabinet card albumen prints?

Tom Butler: I started appropriating vintage postcards when I left art school because I had little money for material, no workshop to use and I was moving around a lot. Using them felt great because even though they were cheap and small they offered me a pictorial space to be creative. They were small portable readymade environments for me to intervene by inserting drawn objects. I made lots of bizarre sculptural proposals such as barriers dividing up towns, enormous bugs climbing up buildings or skies filled with balloons and wondered what it would like to make them for real, only to realise that the appropriated postcard was the work.

One day I was looking for new postcards and found a stack of cabinet cards in a thrift shop. They were such beautiful photographic objects with just an edge of gothic that I've always loved. Now instead of intervening with a readymade landscape, I had an anonymous figure I could cloak as a kind of psychological clotheshorse.

AO: What particular qualities do you look for in a cabinet card when making new work, and how do you decide how you are going to alter them?

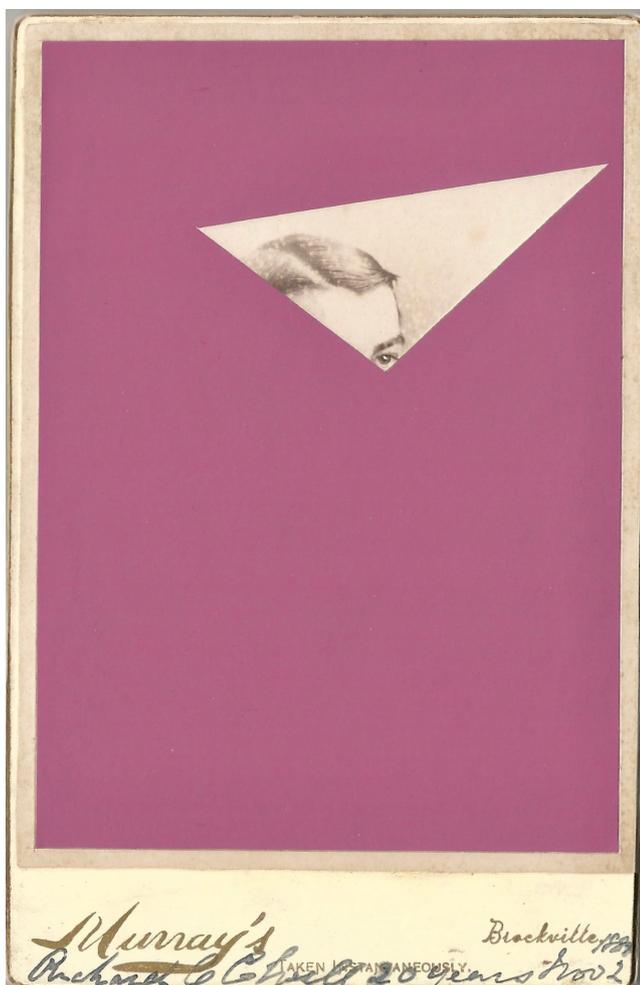
TB: I always start with the eyes, even if I obliterate them. That's why I add a glint of white gouache at the end to bring them to life.

I also look at how the sitter is positioned in their photographic space. If they look confident, uneasy or fading into the background this gives me a starting point. I have a collection of unaltered ones too - every now and then I'll find one so perfect I can't touch it.

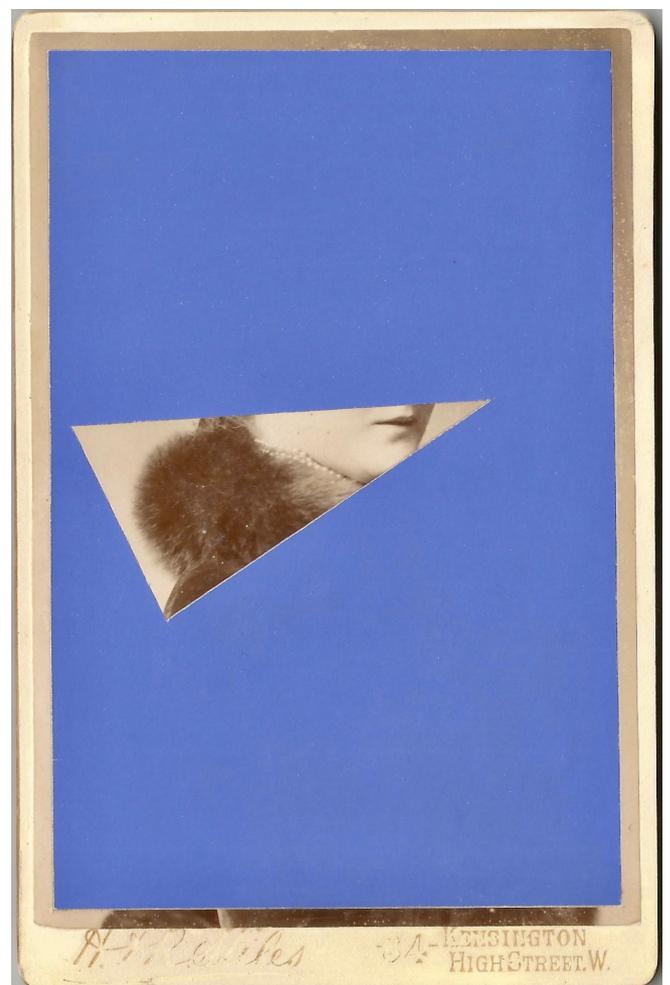
AO: To what extent do you think your two sculpture degrees inform your work?

TB: I rely heavily on my education in Sculpture. In my BA at Chelsea I made things, some of which would fill a room, and I photographed them relentlessly. It was drilled into us to document everything because of postgrad applications but also because a photograph of a sculpture changes how you see it as well as essentially transforming it into another object, in my case a photographic 6 x 4 inch photographic print from the chemist down the road or a 35mm slide from Metro. I reached the point when I was looking at my sculpture and the photograph of my sculpture and wondered if I preferred the photograph.

During my MFA at The Slade, I let the photograph become the starting point, but whilst one side of my work continued to flatten the other became more performative. I made short public performance pieces where I would balance things on my chin or roll myself up in huge sheets of paper but I liked that the photograph was the only physical document of the work. I also photographed my attempts at invisibility by hiding behind mirrors in the street (Invisibility Machine, 2007) and made drawings of spaces beneath furniture that I thought might make good hiding places (From Where I'm Sitting..., 2007). These were all ways I could propose my concealment in a given space without the need to make further physical objects. So while my BA show was a room full of timber and motors, the work for my MFA show could fit neatly in a few folders, much as it does now.



Murray6190 & HH6217, 2017 (side 1) © Tom Butler Studio



Murray6190 & HH6217, 2017 (side 2) © Tom Butler Studio

AO: There are a number of double-sided cards in this series of works, which we haven't seen before. What was the inspiration behind these?

TB: Yes, these are the newest and most sculptural pieces in the exhibition. As I'm presenting a figure on both sides of the card it encourages the viewer to move around it and take a bit more time. I like how they jut out from the wall: they're assertive in their presence but head-on they just look like a sliver of something, hiding in plain sight.

These pieces can't be viewed from across the room, they have to be approached more closely than the single-sided works and this feels more like a personal interaction. It opens up new possibilities for the work. For example, I can pair two sitters in specific imaginary relationships by cutting the up and re-arranging them so their identities become mixed and joined together. Like a couple so close they can finish each other's sentences. I can also divide up a single person and represent them twice; perhaps on one side they seem to be hiding behind a barrier and on the other emerging from it.

AO: You've said before that your practice centres on your fascination with the process of "conspicuous invisibility" – can you expand on this?



O, 2016 © Tom Butler Studio



Gnlies, 2016 © Tom Butler Studio

TB: Sure, it refers to how I find the process of concealment inherently performative and that in the process of hiding you actually end up revealing something about yourself: like choosing a specific face mask or personally designed screen. I remember how much I loved playing hide and seek when I was a kid and especially the moment of being discovered where one is 'seen hiding' in the chosen location. It always felt like a very sincere moment. Being hidden can be very performative, humorous and even a little slapstick, as well as having the potential to be sinister (the horror film, *The Vanishing* (1993), plays this out brilliantly), but I think hiding to a certain degree is something we all do in our adult lives too. We have to play a roll to behave appropriately in professional situations that require self-editing, we wear clothes to signify specific group identities that enable us to do our jobs (a grey suit is a costume that practically makes you invisible), or we find a good pillar to lean against when the room gets too crowded.

Alexandra Olczak is print sales gallery co-ordinator at The Photographers' Gallery.

For further information on Butler's work, contact our Print Sales Gallery at printsales@tpg.org.uk