

Author: Caroline Dawson, carolineajd@gmail.com

Audio Description script for The Photographers' Gallery 2020, Sat 20 June

Please do not reproduce without permission of Author

Jan Svoboda, *Glass wall installation, including study photograph from Tables series* at The Photographers' Gallery

Upon entering the exhibition space from the lift, I move past the exhibition text on the wall immediately to the left of me that runs three-quarters the width of the space. There are a number of small photographs on display in this first section of the exhibition, as well as a small resource space off to the back right where visitors are able to discover more about the first exhibition of Svoboda's work at The Photographers' Gallery, held in 1982. In this alcove there are copies of the *I'm Not A Photographer* book, which details Svoboda's work and career, as well as a video interview with the curators of the exhibition.

Turning left into the larger exhibition space, I am faced with a glass wall partition that runs approximately a quarter of the width of the space. This glass wall is framed with a thin wood, and is made of six panels of glass - three on each side ... with just over 20 photographs contained within. On the floor, in front of this wall, there is lettering which reads:

The Tables series is the most extensive of Svoboda's projects, later developing into his 'Half a Table' and 'Quarter of a Table' works. Featuring the same oval wooden table in the artist's flat, photographed from all angles and in various lighting conditions, it become a small stage for symbolic encounters as well as an exercise in sculptural form.

As the text suggests, these 20+ photographs are from the three series':

- Tables (1970 - 1975)
- Half a Table (1969 - 1972)
- Quarter of a Table (1972 - 1975)

Each of the photographs are held within the glass wall using see-through adhesive photo corners. Each one is a varying size, from very small palm-sized, to between A4 and A3 size. Although some of the photographs are big enough to require being held by both hands ... none are big enough that if you were to hold them, you would be stretching out your arms.

To me, it appears as if these photographs are displayed as if they were on the artist's studio wall. They are arranged in an oval shape, with varying distances between each photograph ... and around a metre of empty glass between the top of the frame and the top photographs, and the same metre distance between the bottom photographs and where the frame meets the floor.

The photographs exhibited within this glass wall are all unfinished works. They make up a collection of studies that were later developed into finished works. Standing in front of the glass, it is interesting to begin considering Svoboda's processes ... when through the glass, on all the surrounding solid white walls, his finished artworks are exhibited. Shadows of the images within the glass fall on the white wall on my right ... their impact layered within the artistic process.

What is important to point out, and what is absent from presenting the photographs of Jan Svoboda's work in print or online, is the sheer physicality of his work. Many of the works in the exhibition at The Photographers' Gallery present a three-dimensional quality. They curl out from the walls on their board mounts, or at the print edges. Some are ripped, torn or damaged by age or wear and tear. It is these physical qualities of the work that shape our experience of it, as much as the content that lies within.

I'm now going to describe one of the medium-sized photographs held at the bottom centre of the wall. This one measures 26cm in width, and 18cm in height, which is a little smaller than the size of a tabloid-style newspaper folded in half.

As the label on the floor suggests, this is one of Svoboda's Table studies, taken between 1970 and 1975. The photograph appears to be a silver gelatin print on matt paper ... it is black and white.

The background of the photograph is very dark ... almost completely black around the top of the image. As I look towards the bottom of the image, I notice that I am looking at thin, short dark wooden floorboards.

The photograph is of an oval-shaped table - the longer sides of the table are at the top and bottom of the image, and the shorter sides are left and right.

The photograph has been taken from quite a height above the subject, looking down on the tabletop. It is as if Svoboda has taken the photograph from the top of a ladder. The angle of the camera lens means that the side of the table at the bottom of the photograph ... or at least the fabric table cloth hanging down from it is visible, whereas the opposite side of the table, where I presume the fabric table cloth also hangs, is not at all visible.

Within the composition, the table is central in terms of left to right. The space between the top of the photograph and the table is much larger than the space between the bottom of the photograph and the table. Almost seven times larger. This large expanse at the top of the photograph is filled with a mostly black background.

If I continue imagining Svoboda standing on a ladder in the position I mentioned, then the light source would be coming from behind his legs. The light is mellow, so perhaps it is coming from a window. The folds of the cloth that hang down from the table at the bottom of the photograph are almost white ... their tone reminds me of frothy milk resting on top of coffee in a cup, before it is stirred in.

The dark, and at some points black background, brings the light-coloured table cloth into a strong contrast. The cloth is creased ... with heavy visible fold lines running horizontally across the centre of the table, one at the side of the table at the top of the photograph, and another on the side at the bottom of the photograph. Five much thinner, lighter vertical lines run across the lay

of the cloth. Creating a grid when joining onto the three horizontal lines, intercrossed with numerous other crumples that run across the cloth like lines on a map. The natural looking light creates caverns and ridges on the cloth where the fold marks are visible.

A small, thin-edged bowl rests on the strongest crease of horizontal line of the cloth. It is difficult to make out the details as the bowl is so small, but it looks to have a dappled texture on the inside, and a small floral design around the edge visible towards the bottom of the photograph. In terms of the composition, if the photograph was divided into four quarters, the bowl is *just* at the central corner of the bottom right square.

The photograph itself, as an object, is heavily damaged. Particularly in the top left quarter ... where there are heavy creases to the paper. Some of the silver gelatin of the photograph has even worn away. The photograph is ripped vertically down the middle. At the top of the image, the rip starts slightly to the centre right. It finishes at the bottom to the centre left. It is a thick rip, and the torn paper is visible between where the two sides of the paper have been rejoined together. The photograph leans forwards within the glass wall, hanging forward where the rip is.

Because of the glass wall, I can walk around to the other side to look at the back of the photograph. A piece of dark brown archival tape has been applied to the rip to hold the photograph together. It runs from top to bottom, echoing in mirror image the diagonal fall of the line. At the bottom of the back of the photograph, a smaller, white sticker has been applied horizontally across the archival tape in support.

Looking at the back of the other photographs sandwiched between the sheets of glass that create this wall, I notice that each image has pencil or pen written on it - whether that be a date, measurements, a signature, a note, an address, or the stamp of reproduction.

In 1969, Svoboda produced a work entitled 'The Other Side of a Photograph' which depicted one of his own photographs from the back. This image captured everything going on behind the picture - residue of cardboard,

traces of handling, the artist's own signature in a blue ball-point pen. This glass walls enables us as the exhibition visitor to think about what the reverse side of an artist's photographs can show and tell us.