

BASIA SOKOLOWSKA

Interior / Mieszkanie



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Martin Browne Fine Art

13 MacDonal Street, Paddington 2021
Gallery Hours: Tuesday - Sunday, 10am - 6pm
Telephone: 02 360 2051 Facsimile: 02 360 3590

Interior / Mieszkanie

*Une lente humilite penetre
dans la chambre*

*Qui habite en moi dans la
paume du repos*

*A slow humility penetrates
the room*

*That dwells in me in the palm
of repose*

Tristan Tzara ¹

No one can deny that there exists between the spaces we inhabit, those we traverse and those we desire to explore, a profound difference. In as far as Chinese landscape painting posits different hierarchical values on the geography depicted, those of us living in contemporary Western societies must recognise that we too make value judgements about the everyday spaces we encounter.

The word 'interior' immediately conjures a number of images. Most often, we will imagine modes of architectural design or a decorated fashion interior rather than explore the concept of an inner space. In contrast, the Polish word 'mieszkanie' denotes both an apartment - that is, dwelling space - and the inhabitation of such a space. It is through her recognition of this *nuance of difference* that Basia Sokolowska has developed the exegesis found in this series of photographs.

Reconfiguring the meaning of 'the look' in fashion interior design by juxtaposing, in montage, hard edged, detailed fragments with representations of intimate space, Sokolowska inverts the process by which we make sense of real space - perspective - as well as our understanding of the constitution of a photographed image. This manipulation of process and perception enables us to transcend the standard 'navel view' of mere geometric space and explore a newfound poetic dimension. One of the fascinations and delights of the *Interior/Mieszkanie* series is in the nature of exchange, both within the cibachrome photographs (incorporating simple self-made pinhole camera images), and between these and the enlarged black and white pinhole images. Engagement in this process transports the viewer to a space *between* recognition and imagination.

Culture presupposes that, as socialised beings, we share with other members of our communities "... an organisation

of experience that includes the standards and values for judging and perceiving, for predicting and acting."² The act of looking is not indifferent and vision, therefore, "... is structured in such a way that the look already includes a history of the subject."³ Our reactions are also coded: what we see "... is already linked to a learned response."⁴ It follows then, if we are able to alter the way we see, we can set aside implicit meanings and open ourselves to new experiences and suggestions.

This is precisely the effect attained by Sokolowska's colour cibachrome photographs in this series. It is with these images, reinforced by the enlarged black and white pinhole photographs, that Sokolowska attempts to reinvent and articulate the meanings of intimate space. The colour images, which project glimpses of magnificent designer interiors, are recognisable as such due to their emptiness as much as their stateliness. The high gloss of the format compounds this identification by connoting the glossy magazines within which we have become accustomed to finding such examples of desirable space.

Of course most of us never encounter the actual space represented, just the controlled and edited version portrayed within the magazines. With Sokolowska's treatment of these spaces in negative, the images appear as dreamscapes, their surreal quality heightened in contrast to the pinhole images of interiors with domestic clutter seen in positive.

Susan Sontag has identified surrealism as lying "... at the very heart of the photographic enterprise: in the very creation of a duplicate world, of a reality in the second degree, narrower but more dramatic than the one perceived by natural vision."⁵ Of course, she is not referring specifically to the use of photography within the design industry, but she has inadvertently laid bare one *requirement* of interior design photography and marketing.

The surreal quality of these empty spaces is all important in the presentation of these images to the consumer. They are attractive to us because they are empty. We browse through these spaces without automatically associating them as belonging to any one person, understanding that they are presented to us as available for purchase (if we can afford it). We desire them because we know that the contents of these magazines have been determined as desirable by those who are deemed to know. This mode of consumer manipulation is as powerful as the domestic ideology of our post-war culture which espoused the ideal of a home on a quarter acre block and the accompanying Holden.

By making surreal the space of the fashion interior, Sokolowska questions the status of interior and fashion photography within our society and suggests in contrast that the elusive black and white pinhole interiors are therefore more real and more significant. Estranged by the negative and thus less approachable character of the fashion interior, their intimate shadows beckon to us. She reinforces this notion by introducing into the colour montage a selection of personal mementos, fragments of domestic detritus and found objects which function, together with the pinhole images, to push the designer interior further into the background.

We transform our identification of these areas as desired spaces as we are invited to linger and ponder the lyricism of the compositions as a whole. In Sokolowska's photographs the occurrence of centrally placed doors and windows invite exploration through reverie. The doorway has been described as one of the daydream's primal images, a cosmos of the half-open that accumulates desires and temptations.⁶ In many of her images our eye travels to these gateways of intimacy along textured paths comprising the familiar and the everyday: used pieces of cloth or paper, fragments of broken glass, a hint of gauze,

a jewel, a feather.

Through montage, Sokolowska hints that the proper place of grandeur and immensity is in an intimate dimension.⁷ This notion is more directly evinced in the series of enlarged pinhole images that work with the lyricism of the colour photographs to expound the idea of the poetry of intimate space.

Bachelard has written "... in the presence of a perfectly familiar object, we experience an extension of our intimate space."⁸ This is nowhere more apparent than in the home, which is a significantly different place to those spaces represented in the images of the interiors of houses we see lauded as our dream homes. The notion of home is inextricably linked to our concepts of refuge and shelter, to our feelings of belonging and the status of our psychic well-being. However, like the "mieszkanie" of the title of Sokolowska's works, it is only truly inhabited space that carries the notion of home.

This characterisation of home, of a sense of place, is explored on two levels in the *Interior/Mieszkanie* series. In the cibachrome images, Sokolowska employs a variety of devices in technique and composition to invert the status of designer interiors. In the enlarged black and white photographs, the elusive quality of the pinhole images we glimpsed in the colour montages is transformed by the possibility of close scrutiny. We find that we are able to recognise shades of the clutter of familiar, and yet unknown, domestic interiors. Obscure impressions metamorphose into intimate spaces and the images we previously viewed with puzzlement are now endowed with the dark poetry of the melancholy of memory.

Photography has been seen as actively promoting nostalgia.⁹ This is most strongly sensed with the use of black and white images. Contemporary life assaults our

senses as a full colour, high powered, ever moving drama. When we see a black and white photograph, disregarding for the moment the practice of photojournalism (usually only seen only in its end form), we are invited to reminisce.

Gaston Bachelard has recognised that the way our unconscious deals with the spaces in our history, in particular the homes of our past, is vital for the localisation of our memories. He coined the term 'topoanalysis', as an auxiliary of psychoanalysis, for the systematic study of the sites of our intimate lives; suggesting that, for a knowledge of intimacy, localisation in the *spaces* of our intimacy is more important than any determination of dates.¹⁰

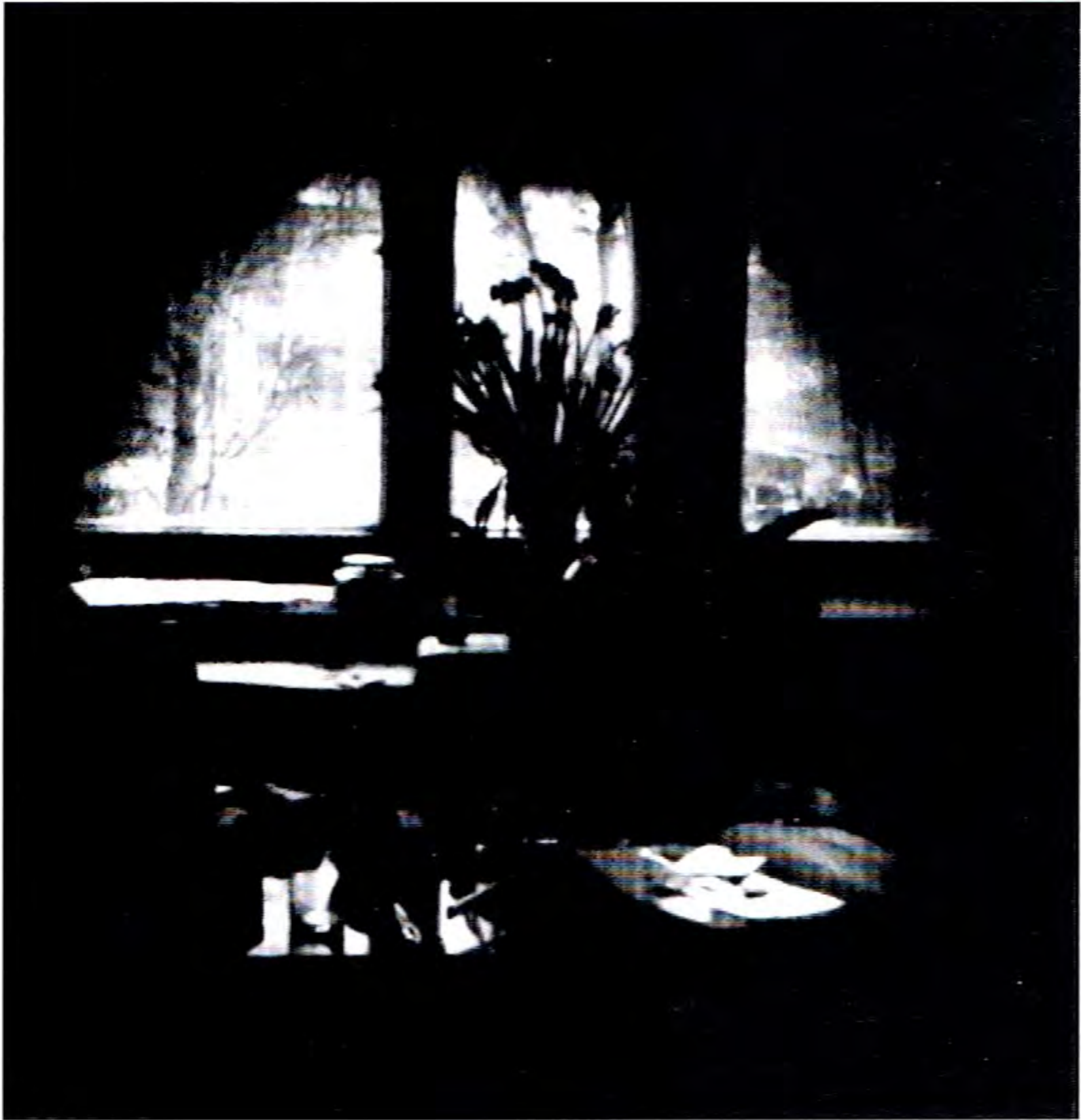
Sokolowska's pinhole images, by virtue of their technique as well as their subject, speak of time past. With their emotive power heightened by the abstract quality of the soft contours and irregular patterns of light, they play on emotion and memory, reinforcing the remoteness of early memories, childhood dreams and distant lives. They were, in fact, taken in her parent's apartment during her last visit to Poland in 1992. With this knowledge it is easy for us to come to terms with the dense melancholy they exude.

However, as alien observers of records of a time both distant and past we are still able to personally identify with the intimate power of their message through the effect of nuance, whereby the fragments (of recognition, memory) on offer to us override our subjective experiences. As Bachelard has stated, the values of intimacy are scattered in all the houses we have inhabited, and the virtues of shelter so deeply rooted in our unconscious that they can be recaptured through nuance alone.¹¹ It is the deployment of the power of nuance in Basia Sokolowska's images that so effectively engages the poetics of space.

Jane Raffan, July 1993

Notes

1. Tristan Tzara, *Ou boivent les loups*, quoted in Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, Maria Jolas (trans.), Boston: Beacon Press, 1969, p226.
2. Paul Walton, Preface, in Victor Burgin (ed.), *Thinking Photography*, London: Macmillan Education, 1982 (rpt '87).
3. Victor Burgin, "Photography, Phantasy, Function" in V. Burgin, *Op.cit.*, p188.
4. *Ibid.*, p193.
5. Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979, p52.
6. Gaston Bachelard, *Op.cit.*, p222.
7. *Ibid.*, pp192-94.
8. *Ibid.*, p199.
9. Sontag, *Op.cit.*, pp15-16.
10. Bachelard, *Op.cit.*, pp8-9.
11. *Ibid.*, pp12-14.



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