

## Art Review:

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**Above:** Bill Jacobson, *Untitled #4072*, 2001, chromogenic print, 30 x 36cm. **Below right:** Susan Hiller, *Witness*, 2000

### LOSS AND GAIN

"Photographs," writes Susan Sontag in *On Photography*, "are a way of imprisoning reality, understood as recalcitrant, inaccessible; of making it stand still. Or they enlarge a reality that is felt to be shrunk, hollowed out, perishable, remote." One can't possess the present, but one can, she suggests, possess the past. I first came across Bill Jacobson and his painterly, intelligent photographs about five years ago. I was captivated by the ectoplasmic, fragile images hung around his studio walls, which seemed to draw not only from the visual sensibility of blurred 19th-century daguerreotypes but also from late 19th-century literature, from writers such as Proust who deal with the nature of remembrance. But while Proust suggests that reality is always something experienced through a glass darkly, photography implies instant access. Bill Jacobson's photographs subvert this easy interpretation.

In the 1990s much of his work dealt with the death of friends through Aids. But this was no ghetto art; rather a rich source of imagery that became universalised in his pale grey, ghostly works into elegies of loss. A lonely figure standing on a beach at the edge of the ocean recalls the paintings of Caspar David Friedrich, in which the protagonists, dwarfed by the immensity of nature, stare into the distant void. These silvery images of

two men embracing, the nude back of a woman or a pair of clasped hands evoke a subtle poignancy. Tender and humane, they function as archetypes. Water, too, features as a powerful leitmotif in Bill Jacobson's work: the sea as the unconscious, as the source of life, as elemental.

More recently, he has introduced colour. Much of the imagery is of New York City where he lives. The tristesse of the earlier works is, perhaps, less in evidence. These newer photographs evoke presence, not absence, and make reference to the way the mind works rather than how the camera sees; not in sharp focus, but smudged by experience, mood, expectation and preoccupation. These are the images of a quiet observer, the city unfolding as a narrative or film. We sense it as a place of alienation, a shop window of desires, a longed-for utopian space that can never quite be entered or known. This is not the slick cityscape of postmodern signs, but rather the realm of the romantic dreamer. The city is a river of sensual experience through which we float but which we can never totally grasp. As with all Jacobson's work, these lyrical images provoke questions about the meaning of our lives and their tenuous nature.

**Sue Hubbard**

*"Bill Jacobson: New Colour Works", 11 Oct-10 Nov, Rhodes + Mann, London E2 (020 7729 4372, [www.rhodesmann.com](http://www.rhodesmann.com))*