

Of Glass and Mirrors: Life in Reverse

In late 2019, a strange rabbit hole opened up, as an infectious virus that came to be known as Covid-19 was discovered in Wuhan, P.R. China. The virus soon spread, reaching pandemic status by the spring; a pandemic which ultimately came to encapsulate the world. Millions of people across the globe fell through the rabbit hole and into an unfathomable, removed reality characterised by stasis, isolation, distance and the scent of hand sanitiser; a reality that eventually became the new normal. Covid-19 cases and deaths continued to rise, and by 23 March 2020 Great Britain was in a state of total national lockdown. Only essential shops such as supermarkets and pharmacies were open, and outdoor activities were restricted to one hour per day. Schools were shut, and working from home became the norm, while the most vulnerable shielded in the confinement of their homes. Months of isolation and strict social distancing regimes followed, where families and individuals experienced a contactless existence; apart, yet together in parallel, topsy-turvy worlds. The population watched streets grow eerily empty through their windows; windows which came to be used as communicative screens, displaying handwritten messages and colourful rainbows in support of one another, and in celebration of the efforts of National Health Service staff and other key workers.

This is the reality and the context of photographer Carole Evans' body of work, *Through the (Looking) Glass*. The photographic series centres on life in this period of imposed lockdown, and consists of portraits of her neighbours, taken through their front room windows. Evans has a longstanding interest in local narratives and human stories; her work often centres on the untold, the vernacular, 'minor' histories, and relationships between people and place. Her collaborative and participatory methods of working are also recurring facets of Evans' work, as she tends to involve local communities or individuals in the creative process. This is important, as her approaches are central to this series of photographs.

Confined to her home during lockdown with the allowance of an hour of outdoor activities a day, Evans set out to document the lived reality in 36 homes on her south London street. As in most big cities around the world, despite the close proximity to others, life in London is often one of anonymity, where neighbours may not speak to or know one another. As many suffered from the isolation of lockdown, one of Evans' neighbours created a WhatsApp group for the street; a closed social media network of local residents who could look out for one another and support some of the more vulnerable neighbours. New relationships were soon formed, neighbours started to interact with one another from the parallel isolation of their homes, and it was through this digital platform that Evans was able to connect with the collaborators in her series of portraits.

Half of the households on Evans' street chose to partake in the project, the photographs of whom are featured in this book. Subjects appear alone, in pairs or gathered in family units, gazing out from behind the glass of their front room window. Some seem to be in deep contemplation, some appear to be focusing on the outside world, some look at one another, and some meet our gaze. Evans and we, the viewer, peer back at them from the other side of the glass; a particular form of looking that we may not be used to. Culturally, the act of gazing through a window follows a strict one-way system; one looks *out* (onto a public world) - not *in* (on a private world) - through a window, and one is certainly not meant to

look through the windows of our neighbours. In this series of photographs, the depicted residents invite us to engage in an unusual act of peering in, as they appear within the external frame of their front-room windows, looking out. Reflections of the outside world in their field of vision can be glimpsed in the reflective surface of the glass. In the context of Covid-19, the window – the windowpanes, the glaze bars, the sashes - becomes a repeated marker, a visual sign, of our forced separation from and loss of contact with others. The aperture of the window simultaneously opens up and divides space; it is both an erasure and a demarcation of the inside and the outside, the private and the public. The restrictions of lockdown in many ways centred on this division, as the outside was as restrictive as the inside; there was no reprieve from the omnipresence of the virus. This body of work thus reflects the affinity, connectedness and closeness of a community in an era of total separation. Separated yet together. As a sequence without a hierarchy, the portraits suggest a notion of coexistence during a very particular – and peculiar - point in time. In some ways, they become what critic John Berger would call ‘mementos from a life being lived’.

The title of the series of photographs, *Through the (Looking) Glass*, is a direct reference to Lewis Carroll’s 1871 sequel to *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, where Alice steps through a looking glass – a mirror – to discover a confusing, alternative world where everything is the reverse of what is expected. Though rarely used in everyday language these days, the term *looking glass* refers to a mirror or an object with a reflective surface, which presents a visual mirror-image of the world, where right and left are reversed. Carroll places the reader in the middle of a looking glass world; an upside-down, back-to-front world without logic, where ‘things are not as they should be’. In Evans’ body of work, the viewer is invited to spy through a metaphorical kaleidoscope of 36 looking glasses and enter the bewildering new realities experienced during the pandemic. The very medium of photography is by nature one of glass, mirrors, frames and looking; just think of the glass of the lens, the interior reflex mirror and the viewfinder of the camera. Its history is scattered with views of, through or from windows, including some of the oldest remaining photographs. It frames and it duplicates, and it creates photographic visions of the world in miniature. In Evans’ use of medium format slide film, these miniatures appear sequentially, as positive images, one after another on transparent film strips, like lined-up rows of tiny square windows to be looked through. By turning her focus to discrete moments of the lived experience of domestic life in lockdown, Evans presents a world of mirrors inside mirrors, frames inside frames, doubly framed by the window frames inside the viewfinder of the camera. Interestingly, looking through the viewfinder of her Hasselblad camera Evans sees yet another fleeting mirror image, as the medium format camera presents a disorienting back-to-front image where left is right, and right is left. Life in reverse.

At the point of publishing this book, we wonder how and when we will be able to crawl out of the strange rabbit hole and emerge from the looking glass world of the pandemic, and whether we will – much like Alice, return to never see the world in the same way again. ‘Photographs are a way of imprisoning reality’, noted the renowned writer on photography, Susan Sontag, 40 years prior to the start of the pandemic, and in the context of Covid-19, Evans’ *Through the (Looking) Glass* reflects a double imprisonment. Importantly, it is a visual document for the future; it furnishes a multifaceted looking glass into the parallel, lived realities of the global emergency of 2020, and a testament to the kinships, connections, closeness, and friendships that formed in the extraordinary circumstances of mass isolation.