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Tom Hunter: Making People Matter

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Tom Hunter is committed to making outsiders matter in our culture. His work, sensuous, lyrical and romantic, is also unfashionably political, something we don't expect in this cynical age.

Tom Hunter

Squatters rights, politics, housing issues, this is Tom Hunter's territory. Travellers, performers, "outsider" communities, residents of "no-go" estates, these are his subjects. His seductive, colour saturated works, many based on Vermeer's paintings, expose the myriad situations and living conditions of his sitters, through meticulously planned, dignified, portraits. Light and colour flood his works. His house and studio, still in the same streets in London's Hackney, where he squatted for many years, is now saved from demolition and is about to be regenerated. Yet there is a nostalgic tone in his voice for the sound-system parties, communal activities, street theatre and performance that was so much part of the squatter's and traveller's community. This all seems consistent with a man who became a tree surgeon, fell in love with the beauty of the rainforests, and decided, after documenting his travels on a SLR, that he should enroll on a photography course. At times when he talks, he seems to unveil a magical world. He wants to reverse the stereotypes and show a warmth and colour that he feels society often neglects to see or acknowledge when talking about or photographing these communities. Seductive is a word Hunter likes to use in the context of his work, he wants to seduce with the high-art associations to Vermeer, and more recently Piero della Francesca. These are works with a political message. He seems genuinely surprised by the success of his 'Persons Unknown' series and the publicity he received when he won the John Kobal Prize. 'I thought that politics and beauty were out of fashion.' Tom Hunter has touched a nerve.

Jean Wainwright: Could we begin by talking about *Ghetto*? A work that took you a year to complete, and which is now in the Museum of London. How did the work come about?

Tom Hunter: Well, basically, I was at a party, at a mutual friend's house, and talking to James Mackinnon about an idea I had for a project. He had been doing film set design, and he's a painter, and I really wanted to break away from just doing photographs and bring in different disciplines, like film, model-making photography and painting. Previously I had made a couple of maquettes of houses that people were living in, which had photographic veneers for the fronts, black and white. You looked in, and they had 5x4 transparencies inside, in doorways and windows. I was talking to him about taking that further, of doing the whole area in Hackney, making a model of the two streets where I live, so in effect you could walk round the whole block. He was just totally inspired by the whole idea. He said that he really wanted to do something on similar lines. We ended up talking about that all night, and yeah, that's how it all started! The idea was that when you walked down the street, and looked into the houses, you took on the role of being a rostrum camera on wheels. So you are actually moving, and your perspective changes, as you look in the windows, they go into vision and they come out of vision. The thirty five 5x4 transparencies inside the windows, which are back lit, give it quite a filmic quality because of the richness of the colours and the light. The model, when I originally had it in the first exhibition, was seen in semi-darkness, so you couldn't really see the outside very well. It was not very clear, but all the houses radiated this light from within.

J.W: You made *Ghetto* for your degree show at the London College of Printing in 1994.

T.H: Yes, it was a massive project, and I had to get lots of people to help me. No one in the college thought that I would be able to do it. I was persuaded by my tutor at the time to carry on with the project, but to back it up with my portraits. That was when I first became interested in Vermeer. I was doing a whole series of people in their houses who lived around here, these were also exhibited at my final show.

J.W: Those earlier portraits appear more cluttered. When Vermeer became an important influence, did you make a decision to treat the space differently?

T.H: Yes, but not so much as to clear the space. With the early works I wanted to get as much of everything around my sitters as I could. I wanted to get people in their houses and show everything that was going on. With *Ghetto* it was the same sort of idea, to show as much of the whole area, and what was happening. I was also inspired by a

Hackney Gazette article that called the whole area I live in now "a crime ridden, derelict Ghetto" and questioned why would anyone want to live there anyway. At the time there were a hundred and twenty of us living here, and it was the best place that I had lived in my life. It was a happy community, with everyone helping each other out. I really needed to show everyone else what it was really like, that it was a positive warm community. I wanted to show that these people were actually achieving things. I aimed to get as much life as there was into the photographs, using wide-angled lenses. One portrait was of a female puppeteer. She's not on the dole, she's not lying in bed shooting up drugs, she's a very busy, creative person. You can see that people have put a lot of time and effort into their houses, and made them warm interesting places to live. Then, when I got really interested in Vermeer, I was looking at his work and noticing the similarity in the spaces and colours I was using. I didn't actually copy his work, the similarities weren't so obvious, but it was an inspiration for some early photographic works, which I developed further with the *Persons Unknown* series. There had recently been some very negative pictures of people living in Whitechapel, and I was going to the same place and taking beautiful images. You see these people's clothes, the textures, the colours. You have a wonderful mixture of tapestries, silks and embroideries. You see a chandelier in a wooden caravan...

J.W: *Persons Unknown* is the series that captured people's imagination, with its colour, the references to Dutch still life and genre painting. Can we talk a little more about this?

T.H: When I got to *Persons Unknown* I was in my last year at the Royal College of Art, approaching my degree show. I knew that I wanted to take my portrait series further. I returned from travelling to the community that I had spent all my time at college with. At that time we had got another series of eviction notices addressed to "persons unknown" and I'd thought that we had saved our community. They can't actually say that they know anyone in the houses, even though they know us all by name, and people have been paying bills and the rest of it. I was looking at Vermeer and I noticed that a lot of his paintings look at the ordinary and what is going on in the domestic lives of the people. They also look at what is going on in the wider relationship, and what was going on in Holland at the time. With *Girl reading a letter at an open window*, she has a boyfriend or husband who is away fighting the Spanish. It is about Holland getting independence from Spain. Vermeer was one of the first people to take the ordinary people of Holland seriously enough to represent them and to say that these people are worthwhile. He brought them up to another level. That's what I wanted to do. I wanted to spend a lot of time with my subjects, and show that they were worthwhile and important, that they needed to be represented properly. Vermeer was talking about a small



Tom Hunter
Woman Reading a Possession Order,
 Cibachrome print
 Courtesy Jay Jopling, London

area in Holland called Delft, and I was talking about a small area in Hackney, and well, it's called the Ghetto now. It's forty houses here, so it's a small number of people in houses with similar lay outs. All the houses are very interesting places, with fascinating people. I'd got a book of Vermeer's paintings, and lots of people's faces just seemed to fit, seemed to match the paintings, it felt like a natural process. I would visit my friends and ask 'what do you think of this painting?' And they'd say 'yes I think it's beautiful', and I would say 'I want to show you in this painting, and talk about our circumstances, which are happening to us as a community at the moment. I think that we could represent this well through a series of photographs.' So I got lots of people interested, and they wanted to pose as subjects. My next door neighbour posed for *Woman Reading a Possession Order*. At that time she had just had a child, and it seemed to be the obvious symbolic link, to take the bowl of fruit and replace it with the baby, because that was the fruit of the womb. The closed window, instead of being open, just little things mattered. Just capturing the light was very important. I really got into it, it was about seduction in a way, as well as talking about older genres of painting. At the RCA at that time we were discussing advertising, and genres of painting, and places like the National Gallery. You're told from a very early age what art is, what is beautiful, and advertisers take that on board. They show something that they think we should all aspire to, and they take on the genres. So I did that too, took on the genres and put them in a new context, because all these neighbours were squatters. You carry on that feeling, so that people think that they are important, and that they are in a beautiful piece of art. You seduce the viewer, with the light, with the composition, with the fact that they know that it is based on Dutch genre painting. Then, with a small change of the title from *Woman Reading a Letter at an Open Window* to *Woman Reading a Possession Order* you actually talk about squatting, homelessness, urban housing policies, and council policies, and contemporary issues.

J.W: You obviously spend time visiting your neighbours, getting to know their surroundings and circumstances.

T.H: Yes, I would notice the light at different times of day, when the sun would hit certain rooms, how it would

illuminate faces or objects. All the houses have the same layout. I would spend time with a cup of tea and a book, and talk to them about what I was going to do. I'd get there at nine o'clock, to set up for eleven o'clock and spend a couple of hours preparing. I'd get some Polaroid's done, so that the sitter became involved in the whole process. With *Woman Writing an Affidavit*, which was based on Vermeer's *Woman Writing a Letter with her Maid*, some people had been squatting in the houses for over twelve years, so the law stands that you can't evict someone if they have been in their properties for that time. People were writing to the courts and saying 'we've got a tenancy.' They were trying to evict us within four days, through the High Court, so it was quite a dramatic time for lots of people. It was a horrible time. For Vermeer too, it was very traumatic time. The Dutch were trying to save their whole country, and we were trying to save our homes. In my photograph the maid has changed to a friend, to make it feel more contemporary.

J.W: In another of your *Persons Unknown* series, based on *Girl Asleep at a Table*, you have produced a really subtle message...

T.H: The whole room is warm and clean and homely, she's at peace, it's her place. Most photographs you see of squats are just chaotic, black and white, cold, so it was a complete turnaround. In Vermeer's time there were court painters, or religious painters. People who photograph squatters are usually friends, but rich people can hire a professional photographer and get a really beautiful image. So I really wanted to show that the subjects I was dealing with were as important as rich and famous people, in the same way as Vermeer. I use a 5x4 camera, large format. I use a tripod, I use Polaroids in the planning stage. My subjects are made to feel important. They know that I am serious about what I do, that it costs a lot of money and that you get a really good result. So these people take it very seriously too. It's very different from walking into someone's squat, or caravan, or bus, and taking out your 35mm happy-snappy. They won't take it seriously, they won't sit still, they move around and pull funny faces. I set it all up formally, sometimes with an assistant, sometimes using reflectors. That seriousness comes though. The subjects come across with dignity. I think that they deserve to be shown in this way. They are not worthless throw away people. Their lives are not worth nothing, they are often doing really worthwhile, creative things.

J.W: On the subject of creativity, this area has a large community of artists. Vermeer was documenting the emerging middle class, you are documenting the emerging artistic "classes", who are often forced to live in these types of circumstances. You don't idolise these people, it's the inherent beauty that you see within the ordinariness.



Tom Hunter
Traveller Series II (Girl in Pink Caravan) 1996-97 Cibachrome print
 Courtesy Jay Jopling, London

T.H: Yes, that's very important to me.

J.W: Were there any photographers that influenced you?

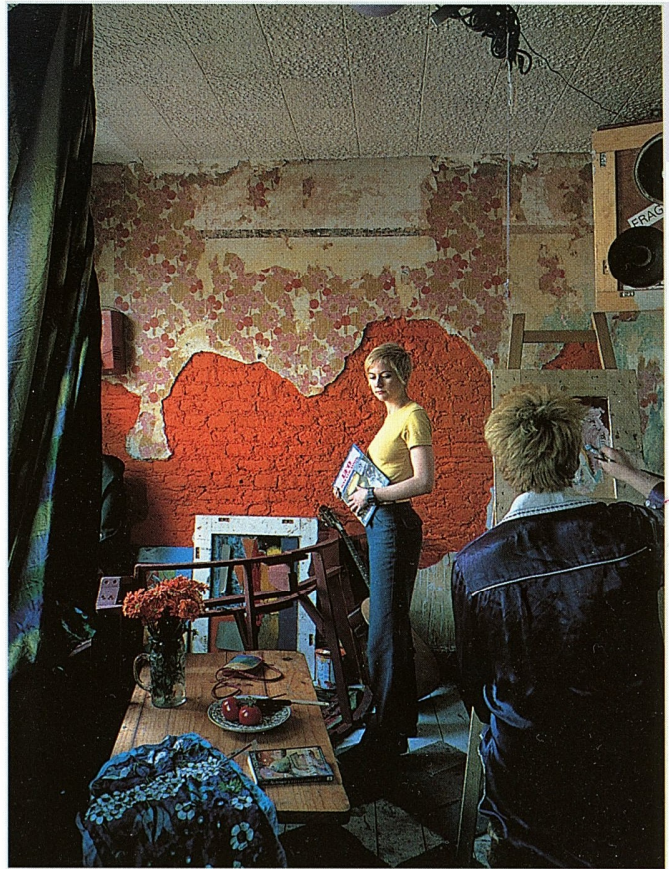
T.H: Sally Mann was a big influence on me, her black and white images. I remember seeing a television documentary on her work, and the way that, like Vermeer, she was dealing with ordinary things all around her. She would see something, set up her large format camera and recreate it. Her tonal qualities are so beautiful, as well as the composition. She is trying to share with others the beauty of her family and surroundings, and black and white can show that. When I was doing the *Ghetto* portraits, I was really conscious that many of the images that I had seen of my community were black and white, and all very grainy, and it made the area look truly horrible in a photo-documentary way. The people that I knew looked very negative and destructive. But round here everything is so colourful - people live without much money so they find things in skips. They use different colour paints and materials, they haven't got the same constraints from landlords, telling them that they can't do things, they have a free rein to do what they want. I really wanted to show the creativity and the colour that people used in their homes. I've nothing against black and white, but colour is very important to me, and it distinguishes me from the people who are covering the traveller scene in a black and white way, which seems to say that it is a black and white subject. I haven't ruled out black and white, I think that for some things it is beautiful, as Sally Mann has shown us.

J.W: Could we talk about your *Tower Block* series?

T.H: When you walked into the room on the 19th floor of the tower block on the Holly Street Estate, I had put up three large scale prints which covered the whole wall. So it was like walking into a mirror: into the image of an identical room in another tower block, taken just before it was demolished. I found it very interesting working with the *Tower Block* series after having worked with the street, and with the travellers. I am very interested in where people live, the type of spaces that they occupy. I come from a very small village in Dorset and everyone seemed to have had pretty much the same type and size of houses, it was pretty much uniform there. There were small houses, slightly bigger houses, and there were fields. Everyone went to the same comprehensive school, and afterwards you got a job. And I left it all behind. Then I came to London and I was a tree surgeon. I found it quite incredible that there were these estates in Hackney where I first lived, and there were thousands of people, put in this tiny area. Then you go under Blackwall Tunnel and arrive somewhere like Blackheath.



Tom Hunter
Warehouse, 1994 Cibachrome print
Courtesy Jay Jopling, London



Tom Hunter
The Art of Squatting, 1999
Cibachrome print
Courtesy Jay Jopling, London

There are these huge houses, and wide open spaces, and the same in Hampstead. I found this quite incredible, because I wasn't used to it. I began thinking 'why do some people live in some spaces and others live in other spaces? I suppose I was caught up by the town planning idea and the whole utopian thing - wondering what people aspire to. This street is very similar to the streets that they knocked down to build the tower blocks. They raised them just as people decided that they were a bad thing. Everyone was given exactly the same space, in exactly the same area, but they were all so different. Hackney is very multi cultural, so I could do two or three photographs a day and I would be in Nigeria for a couple of hours, then Jamaica, then Turkey, so it was like a tour of the world, just going round these flats. Even though they had been allocated the spaces by local government, these people were really proud of them, in the same way as the travellers, the same way as the squatters. Now the tower blocks have been knocked down in Hackney, and they are saying they were the cause of all our social ills. I went in with a bit of that attitude, that we should have kept the type of houses that I am living in. However, when I went into the tower block, and met all these people, lots of them really loved these spaces. There was no noise, they had beautiful views, good neighbours, the flats were spacious. The stuff that they are building now isn't up to the specifications of the old flats. Neglect was to blame for much of the conditions. Local government, especially in Hackney, has been starved of money. They haven't been able to put any of their capital receipts into looking after these estates, and they have fallen into disrepair. When they get like that they just pull them down instead of doing them up. I hope that my work provokes people into thinking about the issues surrounding these people and urban regeneration.

J.W: You love travelling. When you were documenting your series about travellers you were in a bus for over a year, on the road. Can we talk about that experience and what you feel it contributed to your work?

T.H: I left the LCP in '94. I took a year out after making the *Ghetto* model, which had been really stressful. I had a friend who worked on a oil tanker, so I sailed round the Indian Ocean for six weeks. Then we bought this old

double-decker bus. We had a sound system and travelled round the festivals. While I was at college I had moved into the squatting community, and concentrated on doing my work. There were people like Spiral Tribe coming into the terrace, there were people who were doing big sound systems, and they were putting on parties. At the same time the Criminal Justice Bill was going through, so all the travellers, the sound party people, and the squatters were getting a lot of flack in the media. They had new laws to stop what was going on, so a lot of people were heading off for Europe, they could have parties there, and would have a better response. People were coming back and saying that it was really great in France or Prague, so I really wanted to see what was going on there, and I documented them in their mobile homes.

J.W: These were also people that you got to know and were spending time with?

T.H: Yes and I really got to know the people better, because you had to live with them, you went shopping with them, and it ended up being more intense. You wind up being in small groups with five or six vehicles and sharing everything, shopping together, getting water... I was always thinking of how I could make formal portraits of them, dignified works, totally opposite from the snapshot approach. I think there is someone called Vinka Pedersen doing the same thing, but her work is very different from mine. I think that photography hinges upon representations of people. It is very important that people are shown in a different way from commonly held perceptions of them. Why should they be outcasts just because they haven't got a mortgage, or because they don't work from nine to five? They need to be included.

J.W: You seem to be fascinated by communities. Having been brought up in a small village in Dorset, I guess that has had an influence on you.

T.H: Being brought up in a small village feels very much like living in Hackney now, perhaps more so a couple of years ago, because we had a squatter's yard at the back with a community garden. We had our own café, with performances and theatre going on, and it was very much an interactive community. In Dorset it was similar. There were lots of kids and there were lots of parents around. We got taken off to the cinema, taken off to the beach, there was a carnival, all the doors were open. It was a great community. The place seems rather different now, people retire there, and the young people have jobs in the town, their lives aren't really in that place. That's true for a lot of communities these days. What I like about the communities that I work with is that the people are still involved with each other. They are working communities.

J.W: Photography is the medium that you seem most comfortable with, but you have worked with video, haven't you?

T.H: I did use different media at college, but I really feel that photography is what I love doing. I really enjoy making beautiful images, and it seems to be going in the right direction and my other things don't seem to be strong.

J.W: Were you surprised by all the publicity surrounding the John Kobal Prize?

T.H: Well, I was really surprised, because my work is quite political, and I thought that was out of fashion. I thought that the two themes of my work, beauty and politics, the romantic, were unfashionable. When I did my show I thought that people would not want to talk about squatting issues.

J.W: You are going to be in the next Saatchi show, *New Neurotic Realism*. How do you feel about that?

T.H: I think it's a good title, because everyone hates it. Everyone laughs about it, and thinks it is funny. But I think that is also good, because everyone talks about it.

J.W: What cameras do you use?

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Tom Hunter
Traveller Series I (Girl in the Bus) 1996-97 Cibachrome print
 Courtesy Jay Jopling, London

T.H: Well, I did use an old De Vere 5x4", but I broke my back last summer. I was hit by a car. I bruised and fractured some vertebrae and I lost the use of my left arm, which made the De Vere difficult to use. It's an old Royal Navy camera. I bought it in an auction and used it for 6 years. Recently I have brought a Wooster 5x4 and I can take that on my travels with me. I use 5x4 transparencies, something I was advised against at college, as most people prefer a medium format camera, and Fuji colour and cibachrome and that gives me colour I really like.

J.W: Have you made a conscious decision not to work digitally?

T.H: I did work on Photoshop at college. I experimented digitally, slotting my pictures onto Vermeer's, but I didn't like it. I do quite like computers, but what I like to get is that feeling, like when you go to a cinema and the lights are off, and you are totally absorbed with the image. You can get that with photography. Nothing can beat film, the craftsmanship in producing a really good image, when you get the light right and the composition right, you shoot it on a 5x4 with good colours, nothing compares with it. There are other interesting techniques, but I don't know that you quite get that seductiveness. When you've seduced the spectator, then you can talk about squatting and homelessness and all these other issues and all the things which I love to talk about.

J.W: We talked before about the sizes of your work, for example in the *Tower Block* series.

T.H: I have experimented with different sizes. In the *Persons Unknown* series I have printed them as 5x4 dupes of the originals, and put them into light boxes. I have also printed them 5ft by 4ft. So I have experimented to see what looks best for what circumstance. Also with my use of colour. I think it depends on the subject, and what you are trying to say. If the subject needs black and white, I would use black and white photography. If it required a more digital image then I would use that. If I was showing something more sinister I would go into black and white. I might want to do computer manipulation for a subject like third world debt.

J.W: You mentioned that you are looking at the figure within the landscape now, and at the works of Piero della Francesca.

T.H: His paintings are beautiful, especially the portraits of Battista Sforza, and Federigo da Montefeltro. I want to show ownership of the land, but in a different way. A lot of land now is in common use. I mean, people do still own big tracts of land, but the land is generally more for common use. When travellers stay somewhere for a few days they occupy that land and they become part of it. So I am talking about travellers and common ownership and possession, through being in a place, having some kind of affiliation with it.

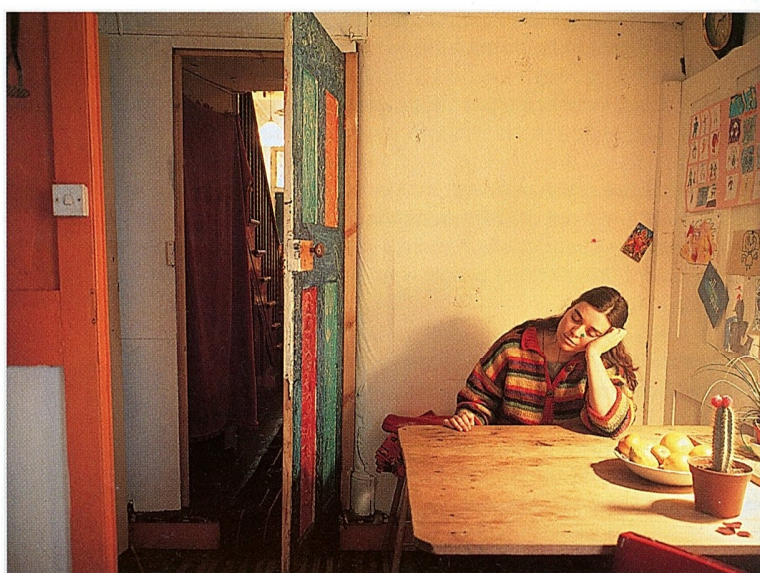
J.W: So the subjects you choose will have an affiliation but it will be subtle. You are talking about seduction through the familiar again, by using Piero della Francesca.

T.H: Advertisers have been doing that for years. They have been looking at paintings from the past and placed contemporary people in the same poses. Then you are being seduced into buying. They are saying that buying this product will make you feel rich and famous and gorgeous, everyone will run after you and want to have sex with and marry you. I'm doing the same sort of thing. By doing that, my subjects become rich and ennobled. People look at them and think they must be important because someone has placed them in that pose. If you take a quick black and white snap of someone they are not important, and you can take it in a more negative way. Now if I'm out with anyone, I spend my time looking at landscapes and angles and thinking about how they will look, but they all fit into that little rectangle. I'm absorbing different people in different landscapes in different countries. Also, I never used to like contemporary painting, but now I am starting to look at things like Rosie Snell's landscapes and Peter Doig. I have started being influenced by contemporary painting as well, which I find more interesting than contemporary photography.

J.W: After you left the LCP and went to the Royal College of Art what were the differences on your M.A. course?

T.H: An MA does seem to be in some respects fine tuning. Some people think that's bad and some good, but it does give you a chance to pursue a certain consistency. So it really was fine tuning everything that I had done before. I think that with the *Persons Unknown* series I said what I wanted to say much more concisely, much more poignantly. That's come across and reached a lot more people, and it's given me a chance to talk to a lot more people, and also given me the chance to sell some work and to carry on with what I want to do. People and places fascinate me, the way that when people moved out of their tower blocks what was left was like their shed skins, the way windows got left open, the furniture got covered in pigeon shit, the empty places became like pigeon lofts. Ultimately the people that I portray feel that they are part of society. Lots of people have this perception that if you are a squatter, or a traveller you don't want anything to do with society. Lots of people live in these places for necessity. What's so wrong with recycling these spaces? Then you change and you move on. This area, Hackney, has changed, part of the community has been knocked down. What we started here was an artists area. This area is becoming really trendy now. These houses will be done up and we will be paying rent and mortgages, so maybe it won't be such a vibrant community any more.

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Tom Hunter
A woman asleep 1999
 Cibachrome print
 Courtesy Jay Jopling, London