

Photo finish, or harmony in grey

Grey is the new blue, and Melbourne with its wintry aspect (for this last week at least) is my new Berlin, courtesy of John Nixon's *Black, white & grey. Photographic studies (photosheets)*, showing at the Centre for Contemporary Photography (CCP), and Corinna Belz's *Gerhard Richter—painting* at the German film festival.

While Richter ruminates on history through his personal archive of old black and white photographs as source materials for his paintings, and whether (scandalously) he should throw them away, Nixon returns to the source to revel in the subtle and not-so-subtle gradations of tone, texture and contrast in the still-life photograph, with its roots in an earlier era of photomontage and cut-and-paste graphic design. Here, the techniques of Eisenstein, the Russian experimental cinematographer, meet the domestic world of Charles and Ray Eames in Nixon's photographs of the black and white geometric patterned silk fabrics in the window of Job Warehouse in Bourke Street and the more natural environs of the artist's house and garden in Briar Hill. The palpable materiality and archival sensibility of these non-objective compositions is further reinforced by their presentation as snapshot-size sample solutions mounted on cream manila folders to create 'photosheets'.

As studies in form, that are beautiful in their effect—contrasting natural and synthetic forms, vegetation and the built environment, free-form and geometric or linear elements —Nixon returns to the pure essence of modernist photography. But (like Richter), this reflection on the past is not without irony, given the aura invested in the photographic print, now subsumed by the chicanery of the digital in the reprographic mindset. Just as Nixon goes down to the 'self-serve' Kodak Picture Kiosk at the local newsagent to make his prints after taking them through a Photoshop process to 'restore' them to the desired simplicity of black and white, Richter, with his machine arm squeegee, and relentless careful sifting and sieving of the mighty cadmiums, built up in layers, aspires to achieve the perfect photographic finish. All ways and means, to remind us once again how all that is old is new, and vice versa, like the passing of the seasons.

John Nixon, [*Black, white & grey. Photographic studies \(photosheets\)*](#), Centre for Contemporary Photography, □Melbourne, 13 April - 27 May 2012.

[Gerhard Richter—painting \(dir. Corinna Belz\)](#), 2011, Audi Festival of German Films, Melbourne, April/May 2012.



John Nixon, 'Black, white & grey. Photographic studies (photosheets)', 2011, digital prints on manilla folders, each 35.5 x 46.5 cm. Courtesy the artist and Anna Schwartz Gallery, Melbourne



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