

Photography Sean O'Hagan on photography

## Shots in the dark: Richard Learoyd and his supersized camera obscura

Using a camera obscura that's as big as a room, the photographer creates gothic portraits with a shocking otherworldly beauty



Horse Head (detail) from Dark Mirror. Photograph: Richard Learoyd

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“I was lucky enough to be in the generation before computers became the norm,” Richard Learoyd has said of his time at Glasgow School of Art. “I look back at the time I had there and realise that’s when my life really began.”

It was there that Learoyd started experimenting with the antiquarian camera obscura. The literal translation of the term is ‘dark chamber’ – and Learoyd uses a

camera the size of an entire room. For the uninitiated, here is how he does it: photographic paper is exposed in his room-sized camera, as a subject sits in the room next door, with a lens dividing the rooms. Then the light that falls on the subject gets focused on to the paper, without using a negative.

The first thing that strikes you about his photographs is their mesmerising beauty, as his new V&A mini-retrospective proves. They have a quiet power that, in a long and narrow room, is even more concentrated. There are vast portraits and gothic still lifes, including the dark mirror series that gives the show its title – their glass surfaces resembling constellations of stars.

It's the portraits that draw you in though. Their presence is palpable, but hard to define. This is down to the almost too-real nature of his prints and their painterly aura, which calls to mind portraits by Vilhelm Hammershøi as well as photographic precedents like Edward Steichen.



Agnes with Eyes Closed (detail). Photograph: Richard Learoyd

Sometimes his sitters seem to have actually drifted off into another world, looking like they are either asleep or under hypnosis. Again, there are all kinds of echoes, from the strange Victorian world of spirit photography to Millais's painting of Ophelia.

Much has been made of his painstakingly old-fashioned process. The giant camera obscura he has built in his Shoreditch studio lets him see a print just minutes after a sitting. But it's the results that matter. When I walked around the V&A with him this week, he explained their power: "when an image works, it often feels that an impression of the person has been left on the paper. You can almost feel their breath."

Learoyd is a meticulous master craftsman, drawn to the prolonged process of actually crafting each individual print. (Alas, the company that produces the chemically-coated paper he uses has just stopped producing it. He has stocked up on large rolls, which he keeps in his fridge: "I have enough for 20 years – mistakes and all.")

The fact that there are no negatives means that every photograph is an edition of one. (His gallery prices reflect this – it's around £80,000 for a single print.) The failure rate is high. "Every picture I make is hard won," he says. "There are no happy accidents."



Horizontal Male Nude (detail). Photograph: Richard Learoyd

At his sittings, everything down to the smallest detail – where a hand rests, how light falls on a shoulder – has to be set by an assistant in preparation for the final moment when the image is made. "I don't have much imagination," he jokes. "I do all that is necessary in advance to get the picture I need."

Learoyd uses the same, mainly female, subjects over and over again. He chooses them for the timelessness of their looks and their ability to pose without seeming to. "When it comes down to it," he says. "you can do everything but make a person project". One of

his models, Nancy Gryspeerdt, writes illuminatingly about the experience in a recent book called *Day for Night*. She describes the preparation (a stray hair tucked behind her ear) and “the interim time”, when she is alone in the dark room, holding a pose and a certain look, before “the flash comes and blinds me for a second”. This hiatus – heightened, elongated, loaded with possibility – is, she says, “the only time I really feel the art happening”.



Model 1 (detail). Photograph: Richard Learoyd

Many photographers will tell you they know instantly if they have captured a great shot the moment they press the shutter – but Learoyd can never be certain until each image is printed. “Sometimes,” says Nancy, “you can tell if it’s a picture or not when it’s still emerging from the rollers. As it’s lifted on to the board to be viewed, you already know it’s emanating something unnerving.”

Learoyd’s technical ability is matched by a more intangible gift which gives his images a sense of stillness and quietude that is rare. For me, Learoyd’s images evoke the hinterland between waking and dreaming, between the tangible and the oddly,

unnervingly unreal. They hover there, reminding us of the sense of wonder photography carried in its early days: that alchemical power to captivate and transform.

- Richard Learoyd: Dark Mirror is at the V&A from 24 October to 14 February 2016.
- This article was amended on 26 October 2015 to correct the spelling of Nancy Gryspeerdt's name.

<http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/oct/23/richard-learoyd-dark-mirror-camera-obscura-photography-vanda-museum-artworks>