

# Joachim Froese: Rhopography

Reviewed by Robyn Daw

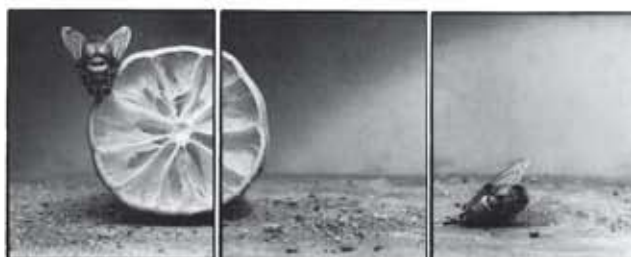
**Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage  
And then is heard no more. It is a tale  
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,  
Signifying nothing.**

Shakespeare, *Macbeth* V. 5. 24-28

Documentary photography frequently sheds light on the larger issues of humanity (conflict, life and death) through imaging the human form. It less commonly focuses on the overlooked aspects of daily life. In *Rhopography* (currently touring Queensland), Joachim Froese presents a series of multi-panel photographs that feature, as their subject, the stiffened corpses of beetles, moths and flies that appear to be playing out a melodrama in miniature amidst the dust and decay of some long-forgotten corner. The exhibition delights in revealing the human condition, as enacted through a series of macabre allegories, to be filled with humour and pathos, and plagued by inevitable misconceptions brought about by misreading.

The similarity of the words rhopography and photography is sufficient to encourage a confusion that their meaning may be as similar as their etymology, and that some strange mistake had been made in the title. Rhopography, from the Greek *rhopos*, refers to the trivial objects and trifles of daily life – those things that are overlooked in the search for big meanings – and is borrowed from Norman Bryson's text on still life *Looking at the Overlooked*. Like the seventeenth century Dutch still life painters who painstakingly laboured over scenes of abundant fecundity – full blooms, buds and juicy fruits – only to add little clues in the form of flies and worms to indicate the ephemeral nature of life and the inevitability of death, so Froese constructs tableaux of insectivora in stage-like settings to indicate the theatrical nature of life even in the midst of death. For these corpses appear more animated, more reckless in their endeavours than the full blooms of historical paintings.

As the viewer is seduced into looking closely at these microcosms of activity, attracted to the rich selenium-toned dioramas, a variety of imperfections come to be revealed in each insect. Here, a healthy looking specimen has lost a leg, there, another shiny beetle's armour is revealed as a porous,



Joachim Froese *Rhopography* #15 2000  
installation view Soapbox Gallery, Brisbane

leaking husk. It is a shell of an animal, in spite of its appearance to the contrary. In a macabre fashion, and without any sense of the horror of death, nor the longed-for metaphysical afterlife, the insects act out a Shakespearean drama of beauty, passion and death.

Froese works within the mythology of documentary photography, and carefully adheres to its semiotics of 'truth', which provides a framework of understanding: what we see must be 'believed' in order for the counterbalance of fiction to be revealed. He works in the tradition of the fine print, using black and white film, perfectly focussed and printed without cropping. The negative dictates the final print, so there is no elimination or editing 'after the act' of taking the photograph. It is a method also practised by the school of German photography emanating from Düsseldorf, such as the Bechers, famed for their deadpan but enigmatic photographs of industrial constructions. It provides an undeniable connection to 'the real', that whatever you are looking at, actually existed or happened, that it is undeniably evidence of 'truth'.

Froese relies on this aspect of photography (as opposed to digitally produced images, or painting, which reckon with artistic interpretation and visual trickery) that the 'truth' is before your eyes, caught in a split-second. Herein lies another deception, for his negatives often take a week to produce, with each setting carefully staged to suggest a certain action which, of course, has never taken place.

Robyn Daw writes and lectures on art-related issues, is a visual artist and is currently employed at the Queensland Art Gallery.