

Press Release

Keith Arnatt

Eden 69–89

November 22, 2023–February 3, 2024

Public Reception: November 21, 6–8pm

Sprüth Magers, London

Sprüth Magers

Sprüth Magers is pleased to present a show of Keith Arnatt's work at the London gallery, focusing on the period 1969 to 1989. The exhibition *Eden 69–89* mixes photographs taken around his home on the Welsh border with physical interventions, proposals and jokes that targeted his own and others' conceptual interests of the late '60s and early '70s. In texts and contextual interventions shown alongside color and black-and-white photographic works of the '70s and '80s, there are surprising connections: facileness of analysis exposed, a kind of Beckettian dross associated with that; the totemic, the beautiful; the sharply reductive; the whole thing, the individual, its breakdown in parts.

The theme of a quick compression or flattening of the analytic moment of conceptual art is consistent throughout Arnatt's early works. It is in the sound intervention *Type-Token Work* (1970) shown here in its New York Cultural Center, 1971 form, a plinth-mounted playback device repeating "Now" at a four-minute interval next to a wall graphic that reads "NOW." The work is a near paradoxical minimal thing, a materialized "now" that extinguishes any sensorial claim to isolate any condition of its experience. Similarly, *Suspended Mirror* (1969), in its final form as a photograph of an action – the photographing of a reflection in a mirror suspended among trees in the artist's garden – compresses the realization of a work into identity with its origination as idea.

By the mid-70s, the period of photographic work *Walking the Dog* (1976–77), there was a redirecting of earlier self-reflexive preoccupations. This was a shift to incorporate an informational (relating to Arnatt's subjects) as well as sensual, spectral fullness in images. In works, this took the form of a kind of relaxed but specific pictorial encoding in images of the narrowed world around him, the twenty or so miles of the isolated rural and post-industrial fringes of west Gloucestershire and its Welsh border. That encoding engaged with references in classical and Victorian landscape painting involving the Arcadian and picturesque, as well as depictions directed at realism and a kind of honesty, even brutality associated with that. It brought forward the informational content of work while acknowledging the inescapable art historical origins of subject matters in associated symbolisms; it related photographic works at root to the histories of uses of imagery in the art tradition.

Whilst *Gardeners* (1978–79) seems an achievement both of his subjects, the gardeners, and technical and social mechanics, as managed by him, the later *Backs* (c. 1987–88), which shows details of commercial yards, is different in conforming outwardly in type of content to numbers of photographic works – through, say, Eugène Atget or Berenice Abbott to Lewis Baltz – that favored a kind of distancing pictorial realism resolved too in terms of minute, telling detail and placement. In *Reece's Yard* (c. 1987), there is a completely embracing silver light lying on top of everything: lorry tire marks, part-built breeze block walls, the mud. Arnatt never treats anything as detritus; everything has a value.

Color photographs – from the darker *Howlers Hill* (1987–88) (Howlers Hill was a landfill site in the Forest of Dean) and from *Pictures from a Rubbish Tip* (1988–89) – sublimate aspects of that valuing and, richly suggestive as they are, float distant from a notion of depicting as in any way directly serially reducible, not to be seen as particulates for which one took a heightened, divisible responsibility. Here, the Edenic, encompassing the ugly as special too, is recast in works as a kind of visual ache, for loss in a reconstitution of the self as consciousness of one's knowing effect on fullness of things in the mind in the visual.

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Keith Arnatt (1930–2008). Selected solo exhibitions include Sprüth Magers, London (2015), Tate Britain, London (2013), Henry Moore Institute, Leeds (2009), The Photographers' Gallery, London (1989, 2007), Centro de Arte y Comunicación, Buenos Aires (1992), Arnolfini Gallery, Bristol (1986) and Whitechapel Art Gallery, London (1977). Selected group exhibitions include Tate Modern, London (2016, 2020), Fotomuseum Winterthur, Museum Folkwang, Essen (both 2014), Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles (2012), Henry Moore Institute, Leeds, Royal Academy of Arts, London (both 2011), Tate Britain (2002, 2007, 2016), MoMA PS1 Contemporary Art Center, New York (2009), Fundació Joan Miró, Barcelona (2004), Kunsthalle Düsseldorf (2003), Whitechapel Art Gallery, London (2000), XXI Bienal de São Paulo (1991), Barbican Art Gallery, London (1989), Hayward Gallery, London, Tate, London (both 1972), Museum of Modern Art, New York, Vancouver Art Gallery (both 1970), Seattle Art Museum and Camden Arts Centre, London (both 1969).

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