

*To Photograph the Details of a Dark Horse in Low Light*, 2012

*Strip Test 1*, 2012

Print on fibre-based paper, 98×199.5 cm.

*Strip Test 4*, 2012

Print on fibre-based paper, 194.5×110.5 cm.

*Magic and the State 32, Magic and the State 35, Magic and the State 36, Magic and the State 40*, 2012

Fibre-based hand-printed, variable dimensions.

*Shirley*

Paper blue back printed on wood, 200×278 cm.

● Early colour Kodak film was designed for a narrow range of light skin tones: it was notoriously difficult to include black and white faces in the same frame. Jean-Luc Godard famously refused to use Kodak film during an assignment to Mozambique in 1977, on the grounds that the film stock was inherently ‘racist’. Early colour film was more effective at depicting white rather than black skin, a fact that became apparent after the end of segregation when American school photographs had to include both white and black pupils. This inability of film to render both light and dark skin in the same image became problematic. That changed when two of Kodak’s principal clients—the confectionary and furniture industry—complained that they could not accurately photograph dark chocolate or wood. Only then, in the early 1980s, did Kodak begin developing a colour film that was capable of rendering darker tones. They described this film as being able to “photograph the details of a dark horse in low light”. Taking this coded phrase as their starting point, Broomberg & Chanarin began a series of works that examined the history of colour film in relation to skin colour.

In response to a commission to ‘document’ Gabon, in West Africa, Broomberg & Chanarin made several trips to the country to photograph a series of rare Bwiti initiation rituals, using only rolls of out-of-date Kodak film stock from the 1950s and 60s. From the many obsolete rolls of film they used there, only a single image could be salvaged because the film stock had deteriorated over the years. In parallel, they made a number of black and white photographic tests, whose parameters were dictated to the artists by a deceased family friend, an anatomist and amateur photographer, Dr. Rosenberg. The work centres around a series of these partly exposed, haphazardly cropped proto-images, originally printed as test strips—the term given to a print made in the darkroom to determine the correct exposure of a negative. By following these instructions to produce a series of darkroom experiments, Broomberg & Chanarin alert viewers to the mechanics at work in the production of their images, in which the grey tones, grain and texture of black and white photographic chemistry are foregrounded.

Also, in the foreground is *Shirley*. Shirley modelled for the Eastman Kodak Company in the early 1950s. Her portrait was distributed to photography labs around the world as a visual reference for correct exposure, leading Shirley to inadvertently

become the benchmark for ‘normal’ Caucasian skin. In contrast, *Strip Test 1* shows a wooden head found in the storeroom of the National Museum of Arts and Traditions in Libreville, the capital of Gabon. Rather than functioning as an archive of preserved local culture, the museum was largely empty: the most valuable African artefacts are owned by and exhibited in European and American museums.

In this wide-ranging meditation on the relationship between photography and race, the artists continue to scrutinise the photographic medium and its political implications, leading viewers through a convoluted history lesson: a combination of found images, rescued artifacts and unstable new photographic works.

*The Polaroid Revolutionary Workers Movement*, 2013

Polaroid picture framed, Fujifilm FP-100C Gloss,

51.5×41.5 cm.

Porcelain camera.

● In 1970, Caroline Hunter, a chemist working for the Polaroid Corporation, stumbled upon evidence that her employers were indirectly supporting apartheid in South Africa. Polaroid was providing the ID-2 camera system that was used to produce images for the infamous South African passbooks, a compulsory document that every non-white citizen had to carry in the state. The camera included a boost button that increased the flash when photographing subjects with dark skin and two lenses that allowed for the production of a portrait and a profile image on the same sheet of film.

Alongside her partner Ken Williams, Hunter formed the Polaroid Workers Revolutionary Movement and campaigned for a boycott. By 1977, Polaroid had finally withdrawn from South Africa and the international divestment movement—which contributed to the end of apartheid—was on its way.

This series of Polaroids was made in South Africa on a salvaged Polaroid ID-2 system. Disobeying the camera’s instruction manual—that told users to photograph their subject from a fixed distance of 1.5 metres—Broomberg & Chanarin turned their attention to a very different kind of subject. Travelling across the country, the artists photographed the indigenous flora and fauna with the intention of subverting the camera’s original purpose.

*Fig.*, 2006

Documents in vitrines.

*Fig. 02*

C-type print, 86×71 cm.

*Plinth, Booth Museum, Brighton, UK, Fig. 28*

C-type print, 21×26 cm.

*Acid-free archival box, Booth Museum, Brighton, UK, Fig. 29*

C-type print, 21×26 cm.

● *Fig.* features over ninety still lifes, portraits and landscapes by Broomberg & Chanarin, drawing together commissioned work made around the south coast of England and internationally, and traces links between photography, imperialism and the colonial tendencies of Britain to acquire, map and collect. This diverse imagery harks back to an era of Victorian collecting, which resulted in strange accumulations of objects being deposited in local museums throughout the UK. As the artists have observed: “The history of photography is intimately bound up with the idea of colonial power. Documentary photographers today have a worrying amount in common with the collector/adventurers of past eras. As unreliable witnesses, we have gathered together ‘evidence’ of our experiences and present our findings here; a muddle of fact and fantasy.” The images range from strange objects found at the Booth Museum of Natural History, Brighton—such as a merman’s body and a unicorn’s horn—to ancient waxworks and a dodo skeleton; from floral arrangements found in the rooms of Hotel Rwanda to a single leaf blown from a tree in Tel Aviv by the blast of a suicide bomb. Elsewhere, pictures of beacons along the South Downs—designed in the sixteenth century to warn of invasion—suggest a geographic and emotional boundary between Britain and the rest of the world.

*To Photograph the Details of a Dark Horse in Low Light*, 2012

Documents in vitrines.

*Nudniks*, 2012

Fibre-based handprint, 32×37.5 cm.

*Portraits with Dodgers*, 2012

Fibre-based prints, 20.3×25.4 cm.

● Travelling through Gabon, Broomberg & Chanarin photographed a series of rare Bwiti initiation rituals. *Nudniks* takes the form of a children’s pop-up game where we see the artists collaborating with the two initiates, both parties taking it in turns to photograph the other. The title of the work is a Yiddish term that according to the writer Isaac Bashevis Singer, refers to a person who becomes the centre of his own attention.

For the rest of the portraits, they used the system described by Dr. Rosenberg, creating a curious parallelism with the passport photos taken in Rwanda after the genocide that they collected for *Fig.*