

Michelle Sank INSULA

Michelle Sank is Archisle: The Jersey Contemporary Photography Programme Photographer in Residence 2013. 'Insula' presents a series of photographs by Sank responding to Jersey culture, community and landscape. The photographs are selected from a new body of work commissioned by the Archisle Collection at the Société Jersiaise Photographic Archive.

Michelle Sank was born in Cape Town, South Africa and currently resides in the U.K. She describes herself as a 'social demographic' photographer: 'My Practice is concerned with the notion of encountering, collecting, and re-telling. I am interested in creating sociological landscapes, interplays of human form and location that are significant in their visual, cultural and psychological nuances. I see my work as a celebration of the constantly changing moments and phases in life.'

Sank is well known for her 'youth work' among other projects: thematic series of portraits of young adults, often those dealing with an adolescent struggle to find their place in the world or define their identity. Her ability to evoke these human states through a direct yet deceptively potent vision has led to numerous commissions and residencies photographing young people in diverse cultural settings: Belfast, Northern Ireland; San Francisco, USA; Mannheim, Germany; and Wolverhampton, England for example.

Writing about her work the photographer David Goldblatt has observed: 'Michelle Sank uses a simplicity of means that falls way below the zealous art critic's qualifying level for success. She attempts a portraiture in which the familiar is rendered quietly, never bizarrely, new.' Her subjects 'seem, completely, themselves; Sank has allowed each one of them simply to be. Yet it is not a passive state, something has been evoked that seems to come from deep within...an essence which is not ordinary at all. It is the unique spirit of the other person.'

In 2009 Sank undertook a three month residency in Aberystwyth, South Wales where she produced work that formed the exhibition and book *The Submerged* in 2011. The project derived its title from parts of an ancient forest buried under the sands of Cardigan Bay which surface after stormy weather. These fragmentary boughs symbolise occasions when people or places seize Sank's attention to be photographed. The Aberystwyth residency provided an open brief and Sank's response to this isolated coastal town and community manifested itself in new photographic modes. Incorporating multiple genres – portrait, landscape and architecture - *The Submerged*, taken wholly, represents the surfacing of a new form of narrative in her practice.

Working outside of particular demographic scenarios Sank's Jersey imagery continues to develop a lyrical vision within which the defining influences are place and cultural geography. As a stranger, present for a limited period only, Sank's 'residency photographs' are of course procured under certain psychological precepts. In April 2013 when she arrived at the Archisle Project to undertake a six month residency, geographic and historical influences also loomed large. There were late twentieth century blanks in the archive to compensate, Jersey's peculiar British-Norman cultural identity to contemplate, economy, politics, community, work, leisure, environment; these concerns together set against a twenty-first century backdrop. As *Insula*, the Latinate title of Sank's resulting exhibition suggests, an enduring islandness is a defining influence in this body of work. It also seems fitting that the *insula* or Island of Reil in the human brain plays a part in regulating self-awareness and emotion.

Insula eschews a specific brief though the work responds to the wealth of nineteenth century portrait photographs within the Jersey Photographic Archive that it now joins as a powerful point of interpretation. The beguiling qualities of these new photographs call to mind the position that Lewis Baltz found for photographic series, 'somewhere between the novel and film.' As such, Sank's photographs offer a visual poem to the island.