

Caught Between

“Memory,” as Walter Benjamin observed, “is not an instrument for exploring the past but its theatre.” We make sense of the present through reference to what has gone before, to the things we remember. And yet in recalling those memories, they are not simply replayed like a record or re-read like a book but performed in the mind’s eye. And we, the director, actor, scenographer, and audience are never the same. We change, we grow or we become diminished by each new experience. Memories change with the passage of time because we do. And yet memories are magical. They enchant us. Perhaps for the very reason that we are actively complicit in the process of their re-creation. We navigate the past not as passive observers but as the very means by which the past voyages on, unmoored from the anchor of space and time.

The performance of memory has always animated the work of the Scottish artist Colin Gray. His early series, made with his parents Ron and Rene, re-enacted in a playfully theatrical and often dreamlike way his memories of family habit and domestic myth. As the years passed, both son and parents aged and in time Rene passed away. The image-making continued, but became more inwardly reflective, increasingly aware of the contingent nature of human existence.

The work in this exhibition begins in February 2013, when Ron Gray was diagnosed with oesophageal cancer. The doctors gave him six months to live. Caught in the headlights of inevitable parting, Colin Gray took photographs as a way to help them both process the inevitable. Images that attempt to capture moments, emotions, realisations as they fell like shooting stars, bright in the moment and then lost to all but an afterimage. To observe with ever-attentive eyes each fading spark of life until the final darkness, that in the gloom of grief those sparks will live again in the scintillations of memory. Memories from which to weave the endless narrative that journeys towards comprehension, just as our ancestors sought meaning in the mystery of the constellations.

A photograph, a frozen moment of reflected light, can only show us surfaces. It cannot, in itself, contain the profundity of mortal experience. But it can suggest, summoning the imagination through a gesture, a glance, a moment stilled. We see this in the gentle images of the artist’s daughter embracing his father, her grandfather, connecting the fading past with the promise of what will be. If we open ourselves to it, such an image can become a site of meditation in which we reach empathically from our own interior experience to that of another. The photograph becomes a portal, but it is we who must choose to step through; to cross the threshold to another’s experience of the world. Such a crossing is, of course, a momentary communion from which we return. Death is a threshold we cross just once. And yet, if we could peer through the portal without actually entering it, what then...?

In 2017, Colin Gray became critically ill, his vital functions sustained by machines, his mind lost to consciousness. It was as if he hovered on the cusp of life and death. His memory, once he recovered, was that he had dreamed. A dream of those who float in limbo, their fate hanging in the balance.

All we ever know of dreams is what we reconstruct in the theatre of memory. Our conscious mind is wired to build narratives, connecting disparate phenomena in an attempt to create some sense of order, of meaning. But dreams are misty things that evaporate in the light of day. They leave the impression of something profound, haunting the conscious mind like ghosts, hardly to be believed, and yet... And yet, as psychologists will tell us, the mind has many rooms of which we remain unaware that nonetheless form part of the architecture that shapes our actions and feelings. What secrets lie in the unconscious mind following a near-death experience, their vaporous remnants seeping under a door now firmly shut? A photograph cannot speak of such altered states directly, but it can whisper in metaphor, suggestively, that we might imagine a memory of a dream recalled from the very brink of existence.

If few of us experience such close proximity to death until our final end, for Colin Gray the experience was to be repeated a year later when he was once more back in intensive care. This time, upon recovery, he set out to connect with others who have experienced altered realities due to physical or mental illness, or a combination of both. In seeking to express the synthesis of these experiences, he drew on the ancient practice of abandoning oneself to music and movement as a way to clear the mind and reconnect with the dreamworld. His photographs capture these neo-tribal rituals in a swirl of motion as the unblinking eye of the camera dissolves his body into a visual equivalent for something unknowable... But, perhaps, a thing which can nonetheless be sensed. A reverberation in which our imagination might find an affective resonance.

In the final part of this exhibition, we return to the endlessly unfolding present. And it is here that the artist notices characteristics of his father manifest in his son, if not himself. Traits that echo across the generations, as the roles in the theatre of memory are passed forward through time. We may all be stardust, we may all be the result of endlessly recombining genes, but, at a human level, what connects us are our memories. We will not be remembered forever, but we will be remembered for a time. And as the fibres of memory bind together like wool, time spins the thread that leads us from our ancestral past through our experience of family to a future others will share without us.

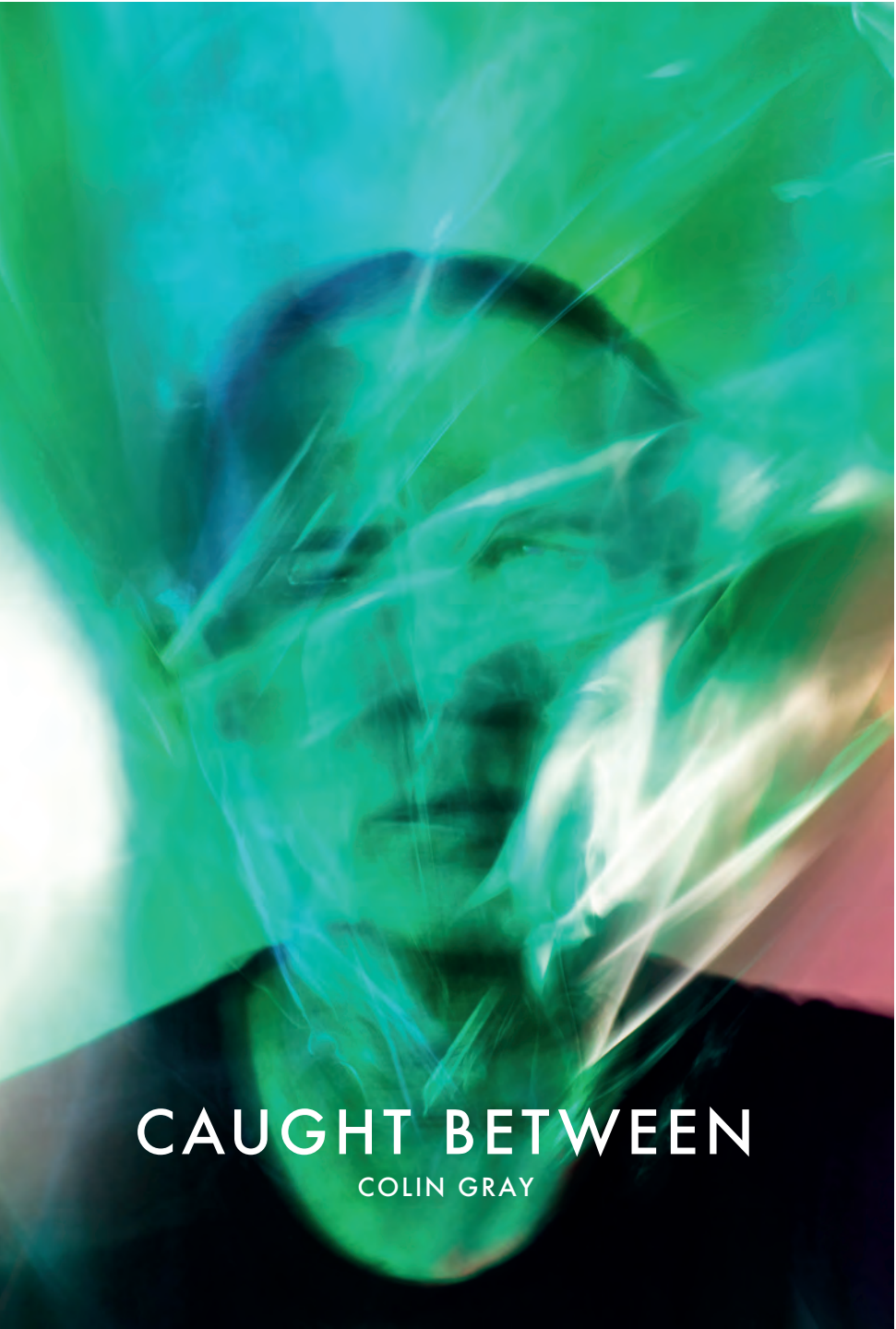
Dr. Alasdair Foster is a writer, award-winning curator, and publisher of Talking Pictures – interviews with photographers around the world [ <https://talking-pictures.net.au/> ]. He has over thirty years’ experience heading national arts institutions in Scotland and Australia and of working in the public cultural sector. A former president of the Contemporary Art Organisations of Australia and editor of Photofile magazine, he was, until recently, Professor of Culture in Community Wellbeing at The University of Queensland, and an Adjunct Professor in the School of Art at RMIT University, Melbourne.



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CAUGHT BETWEEN  
COLIN GRAY



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Colin Gray was born in Hull, England, in 1956. He received a first-class BA (Hons) in graphic design in 1980 and a MA in photography from the Royal College of Art, London, in 1982. He has exhibited widely in Europe and his work has toured to China and Australia. His images have been featured in several books including *‘The Photograph as Contemporary Art’* (Thames & Hudson 2004) and *‘Family Photography Now’* (Thames & Hudson 2016), and in two monographs: *‘The Parents’* (Fotofeis 1995) and *‘In Sickness and in Health’* (Steidl-Mack 2010).



Front: From the series, ‘Caught Between’.  
1. From the series, ‘Do Us Part’.  
2. From the series, ‘Do Us Part’.  
3. From the series, ‘Liminal’.  
4. From the series, ‘Do Us Part’.  
5. From the series, ‘Terms & Conditions’.  
Back: From the series, ‘Terms & Conditions’.



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