

# James Voller

Alright?  
Alright.







All Right? All Right.

New Zealand artist James Voller is not the first photographer to turn his lens on the East End and will certainly not be the last. In fact, Voller's choice to walk these particular streets in search of his subject is a significant one.

In many ways, the East End is not just another corner of London, of Europe, of the Old or New World. It has come to embody the tumultuous journey of the industrial revolution, the waning shells of red brick that would be shaped into the post-industrial age. It is a symbol of growth, struggle, poverty, failure, degeneracy and triumph; of endless sad tales of destruction and even sadder tales of renewal.

Most recently, the social and built-environment of the East End has undergone rapid change due to gentrification and mass development leading up to the London 2012 Summer Olympic Games. It seems that its past history of plague, slum clearance, wartime bombing and the founding and closure of major industry have now given way to a more underhanded and yet equally catalytic agent. We have seen gentrification reshape the cultural and social landscapes of other urban areas such as New York, Rio de Janeiro and Berlin. And now the East End is no different. Areas such as Hackney Road and Victoria Park are now lined with cafes and art galleries and rising rents that belie continuing social and economic imbalance. And yet sitting on a bench outside an edgy cafe or strolling the 'curry mile' down Brick Lane, you might be forgiven for remaining skeptical of such history.

The East End of today, of yesterday, or any time, cannot symbolise the journey of any modern metropolis, for few world cities can be said to have experienced such dramatic extremes. But then, perhaps it can be said that each and every city in the world has one corner where its inner workings come into full view; its own East End which typically manifests somewhere near its central artery and yet remains an 'other'. London's East End may only be a thing of real-world myth, but there is no question of its merits to the photographer. It is here that the 'outside' has remained in reach. The unknown has carried on under knowing eyes. Change remains a constant, for better or worse. In this place it made no sense for photographers to do anything other than document.

The first thing we notice about Voller's photographs, and of Voller's growing body of art work, is that he asks more than is normally expected of the medium. This is a good thing. Photography is a notoriously flat medium that naturally treats its subjects to a non-discriminatory

helping of objectivity, a lashing of sameness on the side. And yet Voller does not accept this. His subjects inhabit a number of different scales and forms. He is known to work outdoors, as well as within interior and gallery settings, and his works are often as installation-based as they are reliant on photographic traditions such as composition and framing: photographic conventions informing his installation-based practice, and vice-versa.

In *All Right? All Right*, we see a number of black and white medium format photographs, physically and technically in tune with anyone's typical, historical idea of photography. Specifically, these images align themselves with a formal tradition of documentary photography. But Voller also includes a single, and much larger image, as well as freestanding installation-based works. The larger wall mounted image, from its dimensions and tone, seems to be an enlargement of one of the smaller medium format images. By contrast, the photographic imagery on the surfaces of his freestanding work is more closely cropped and somehow less 'documentary' in feeling and tone. Voller uses photographic imagery to both describe and create space, engendering an increased sense of presence and impact than we might otherwise experience from photographic images. And yet, as the varying photographic elements come together in dialogue, within the gallery space, they seem to both embrace, and neglect, traditional ideas and conceptions of photography, such as subject, time, and place. These are also some of the fundamental notions of photography that are beginning to feel stretched by the medium's newly found mobile and democratising qualities produced by digitisation.

There appears to be a tension in the symbolic potential of the East End. It is synonymous with low-level brick housing. It folds over on itself, apparently into obscurity or amongst highrise prefabricated blocks, whichever comes first. Voller makes use of the brick as a visual and associative texture to bring the images together. At the same time, however, he chooses not to include any of the more universally recognisable symbols of the East End. We see a number of photographs depicting waterways and riverside buildings, but at no time do we get more than an inference toward the new look and feel of many of these areas that now include high-rise developments and uncharacteristic public spaces. Voller is cognisant of the ongoing gentrification and development of the area, particularly the developments leading up to the London Olympic Games, and yet he refrains, equally, from presenting us with any overt symbols that might cause us to dwell on them.

Through this series of gentle omissions, Voller allows us to look

further than any typical photographs of the East End might normally allow. We may gaze past the touristic subject and the spectacle, and into the walls of red brick that Voller leaves an unsuspecting grey. His treatment of the subject is indirect, diffused, and seems to speak of more than just the physical.

Implicit in Voller's questioning of the subject, and the temporal aspects of documentary photography, is also a rethinking of place. When we look at documentary photographs, the notion of place either informs the subjects' or the images' temporal quality and becomes inherently tied to them, or takes them over entirely, as in the case of landscape or similar studies. At times, place can be the only fixed variable in a photograph that helps us to comprehend it. While we cannot help but feel a diffusion of richness being brought about through the proliferation of images being created today, it seems that a higher volume of imagery, when concentrated around certain localities (such as urban centres), might actually possess cultural value and significance. And while the idea of place has always been a kind of illusion when it comes to photography, given the sense of removal the act of photographing entails, it seems ironic that an image-saturated culture of mobile and interactive dynamics might position a sense of place more squarely.

The single exceptionally large image in the exhibition seems to identify much less with a documentary tradition and more strongly with ideas of presentation of works of photography in a wider field of contemporary art. As digital photographic technologies have become more advanced, and as photography has looked to compete with other media on the museum wall, we have seen photographs of a scale that belies the very idea, if not purely the constraints, of the medium. Voller chooses a single photograph to make use of scale so as to question the scale of the other, more documentary-type images. We note that the subject matter and general approach is similar between these two scales, if not identical. But the way in which the large scale image commands a higher proportion of the gallery space indicates that it plays a more significant role in Voller's position. Perhaps it is the sense of floating in that the photograph provides.

But no element of the exhibition questions the idea of documentary photography as radically as do the freestanding installation works. They heighten Voller's critique but also act to make his observations more wide ranging. They change the way that we read the other photographs, the way that we think about photography while also altering both our sense of perspective and our relationship to the gallery space. With multiple surfaces

and closely-cropped imagery of architectural details and elements, these works seek to at once distill and confuse a sense of place. We can walk around these freestanding works, each angle giving us a different and changing view in a way that indicates the limitations of the photographic image. The architectural, structural nature of the images and their supports remind us that photography, documentary photography in particular, is a type of architecture unto itself, as it constructs and maintains ideas, knowledge, power structures and perceptions of place, just as surely as anything else.

Voller clearly demonstrates an interest in architecture. He is interested in the ways that architecture influences us within the cityscape, within urban and built-environments, and in the ways that we create, influence and shape these environments around us. The urban landscape becomes to Voller a kind of arena made of immovable brick that remains malleable. Change is a constant and so is our observation of it. And yet things somehow still stay the same. Or, perhaps the notion of time and the study of people and places with a hope to gain a sense of it is an incorrect or false measure. As Voller's interests in both photography and architecture remain difficult to separate, he gives us an idea of how he considers the two to operate without mutual-distinction.

The words 'documentary photography' tend to conjure up a variety of preconceptions without a direct impetus to look much further. But it seems that while he assumes an embracing position from which to remain self-aware and critical, Voller thinks there is still hope. Although documentary photography will always present us with a conundrum, what we can learn from Voller is to make use of its turbulent assuredness. There can be no doubt that photography (and by extension, all of its sub-genres) is now experiencing its most drastic reinvention yet. It sits now in an unsure balance with no choice but to follow the arc of the image itself. Voller's work seems to be equally as interested in this wider observation as it is in its critique of the documentary. A number of his treatments and observations, including a reflexive interest in the use of space and context, an interest in mediated knowledge and mediated environments, seem to describe an analogue critique to a digital world with few alternatives.

All Right? All Right., we need to keep moving nonetheless.

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Alright? Alright.  
16 November - 15 December 2012

Beam Contemporary, Level 1, 30 Guildford Lane Melbourne Australia  
3000

ISBN 978-0-9870529-3-3