

Thomas Erben Gallery

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ARTFORUM

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TOM WOOD

THOMAS ERBEN GALLERY

For seventeen years, Irish-born Tom Wood took photographs while riding local buses around Liverpool, across the Mersey from his current home. What's immediately apparent in the nineteen selections recently on view from Wood's "Bus Project," 1979-96, is how much more fluid his approach is than the current conventions of post-Conceptual photography or photojournalism dictate. Eschewing the antithetical forms of simplification specific to programmatic typologies on the one hand and commodified empathy on the other, Wood's eye expresses itself through elaboration rather than encapsulation, expansion rather than condensation. Each image appears to contain several times as much space and information as its modest compass would seem to allow. Shooting into and out of the buses' windows to mobilize both reflection and transparency, Wood juxtaposes interior and exterior, multiplying space to turn the image into a sort of magic box that, mysteriously, is bigger on the inside than on the outside. In *Scotland Road*, 1989—apparently shot as Wood stepped onto the bus and looked back along its side—a reflected horizon cuts across most of the image, as though the landscape were moving through the vehicle rather than vice versa. As a pictorial device, the window formalizes its reflected and revealed contents by arraying visual information across a plane but also renders them ambiguous by transforming things seen into phantasms of elusive location. Sometimes, as in two images titled *Gyratory*, *City Centre*, 1993, all this adds up to a kind of visual din you'd swear could only have been produced by an elaborate mix of double exposure and montage; but the mechanism can also be quite subtle, as in *Kirkby*, ca. 1996, in which only a shadow and some pale reflections on the left side of the image



Tom Wood, *London Road, City Centre*, 1990,
color photograph, 24 x 36".

attest to the intervening window responsible for the vague haziness around two girls seen waiting at the bus stop.

Such formal effects, enchanting as they may be for their own sake, never feel like the point of Wood's pictures. Instead, what we see above all are the fugitive human presences that almost intangibly assert themselves amid this play of reflective and transparent surfaces, that haunt these strangely intersecting and enigmatically dematerializing planes. These people have been captured in a moment in which they've forgotten to "perform the self." Yet in that lapse their inner life is not unveiled but contained. Like almost everything in these images, the human subjects vacillate between absence and presence, in that strange mix of distraction and concentration, that state of reverie that overtakes us when we are waiting for the bus or anticipating our stop. Drifting thoughts—about the most urgent problems or next to nothing—are suddenly interrupted by flashes of odd, unannounced awareness of the surrounding environment. To render this mental space calls for both the angular, jagged cuts of modernist montage and pictorialism's painterly transitions—precisely the synthesis Wood has managed here.

—Barry Schwabsky

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