

Brought to light

Drift.

As your eyes settle on the shadow, as they dilate, you begin to slip. There are no anchors to hold onto. No hard edges. Only diffusions. Slow expansions.

Wine.

There was a time when people debated whether the ancient Greeks perceived colour the same as we do now. Did they see blue? What was a wine-dark sea anyway? But it wasn't about the hue. It was about the shimmer and flare of light on a shifting surface—the moving, shining spectacle of it all. A sloshing cup of wine became a hero's journey through a raging sea.

An image. A phrase. An artefact, of a kind, from a culture with different visual priorities and points of emphasis. But even when vision is understood as cultural as well as biological, you are no closer, not really, to the question you started out with: Do we see the same things?

Wonder.

No, says Robyn Stacey about her new photographs. They're not *of* anything. They're *just light*.

A sly title, when there is nothing more wondrous than light, and nothing more strange. From double slit experiments and wave-particle duality, to the apricity of the winter sun warming the skin. None of us understand it, not if we're honest, but we feel it.

Space.

When we talk about art, we often talk about being *drawn into* works, instinctively using the language of bodies and movement. With their shadows and familiar shapes, Stacey's new light photographs suggest physical space but nothing quite coalesces. The shadows are gradations rather than negatives. There are, as she says, no objects. Instead, there is just the illusion of perspective and depth. The works in *Just Light* are vivid and luminous. They offer a meditative space but it's not one that you enter, not with gravity intact.

Pinholes.

For many years, Stacey built camera obscuras in hotel rooms and artist's studios—darkening the windows and letting the world in through a pinprick. These camera obscuras were

ephemeral works. As the sun rose and fell outside, a reversed and inverted image appeared inside, and then passed away again. They created, as she said at the time, “in-between spaces” that were both in the world but removed from it. They were unsettling mirror worlds—places where the familiar had to be reevaluated.

Drawing with light.

Just light, projected through coloured gels and simple perspex shapes. Light and colour and shadow—the tools of photography. Stacey’s process in this new body of work was analog, and each composition was arrived at through an intuitive process of adjustment, sometimes over many days. This was similar to her earlier photographs of objects from historical collections, which also saw her moving in increments, and constantly assessing and responding to what was in front of her. But these new works, she says, are largely irreproducible.

Each one has been composed with deep attention to balance and visual pleasure. But their intensity also comes from the way they open space for association, memory and emotion. The simple geometric shapes, which are used to both contain and mask the light, allude to the familiar but they are also otherworldly. Some works suggest planetary bodies. Others, thresholds. The colours are saturated. One work shifts from a yellow-toned green, bright as a new leaf, to a tropical aqua found on postcards and paint chips. Just light? Perhaps. But Stacey’s intent is not cool or detached. Instead, she seeks to stir something. Instinctive responses. Feeling. An awareness of experience, both past and present.

Curtains.

Working inside her camera obscuras, watching the world come in as a ray of light, Stacey began to think about light in elemental terms. Then, in *Nothing to see here*, 2019, she projected film onto sheer, softly draped curtains. In this body of work, Stacey was playing with ideas around concealment and revelation, and the history of the curtain in art and cinema, but the device was also a way for her to explore light and colour without relying on a traditional photographic subject or object. The curtain was both foreground and background, intermediary and focus. The development was another leap in what has been a wide-ranging, four-decade practice. “In a sense, I have just followed photography,” she said once. But it’s also possible to see her practice as an ongoing exploration of perception—of how it is shaped, and how that then influences our understanding of our world and of ourselves.

Darkness.

Schopenhauer once said that we take the limits of our own field of vision for the limits of the world. Long before that, there was Plato and his cave. Darkness has often been used to talk about the unknown and unknowable but in *Just Light*, it's given the same importance as light and colour. One work, *The void is a visual place'*, 2021, centres on a receding, endless blackness, but most place light and dark in balance. The shadows are not voids or gaps but points of connection—parts of a whole. They are works that insist that light, although it may be what we are first drawn to, cannot exist without darkness. As the poet Mary Oliver put it in *The Uses of Sorrow*: Someone I loved once gave me a box full of darkness. / It took me years to understand that this, too, was a gift.

Kaleidoscopes.

A spin. A clatter. Colours resolve into new formations. In some ways, *Just Light* offers the same pleasure, the chance to move through sensations and feelings. To enjoy colour. To see the world in a new light. Or just, to see light.

Jane O'Sullivan