

Rosenmeyer, Alfie. "Idris Khan: New Work," *Art World Magazine*, October/November 2007.

Idris Khan

"I'm obsessed with the idea of slicing away time and making images transparent, making them a trace."

IDRIS KHAN has, since his graduation from the Royal College of Art in 2004, swiftly gained recognition as one of the most original artists of his generation using the medium of photography. His works are catalysed by the creative enterprise of others, be it photography, painting, music or print. His best-known pieces layer appropriated images – such as the gas containers photographed by Bernd and Hilla Becher, or the paintings of Turner – which simultaneously obscure the subject and reveal a new essence. As well as paying homage to the originals, these works also question ideas about authorship. *INTERVIEW: Alfie Rosenmeyer*

Where does your name come from?

Good question. Idris is a Welsh name. I was named after my grandfather on my mother's side. There's a mountain in Wales called Cader Idris, and Idris was the name of the King of Gwynedd – he was a giant! It's also the name of an Islamic prophet who is said to have brought rain after God punished Muslims for forgetting who He was. My father is from Pakistan but was born in India, and my mother is Welsh – she was born just outside Cardiff. I have the poetic approach of the Welsh and the repetitive, almost ritualistic, side that comes from being raised as a Muslim.

What are you working on at the moment?

I have recently finished a commission from Mario Testino – he asked me if I would like to make a piece based on his photographs. Right at this minute I am working on my solo show that opens at Yvon Lambert in New York in October. It will consist of a new film piece based on Schubert's last three piano sonatas, and around five new still photographic works mainly based on music, nature, religion and philosophy. And I'm working on a film piece that will be displayed permanently using LCD screens embedded into the pavement outside the entrance to a building at Howick Place in Victoria, London. This has never been done before anywhere in the world, and I see it as an ongoing dialogue with the space.

What interested you about this site?

I was inspired by the original use of the building as a Royal Mail sorting office and intrigued by the history of so many handwritten letters or messages, a constant flow of words being thrown around the space. Living in the digital age, handwritten letters and messages have become obsolete. The films I'll make will be based on me drawing and writing messages spontaneously, played in reverse so that the magic of writing creates a utopian world that'll hopefully mesmerise the viewer.

Do you go through a selection process to find your material, or does it find you?

I've said in the past that I feel I am summoned to a particular book or piece of music. A lot of things that I choose to make work from have a certain place in the history of art, music and religion but also in my own upbringing. If I'm introduced to something, like a piece of music or a particular book, and I get obsessed by it in a certain way, then I become compelled to make a piece from it.

Are you obsessive about images?

I'm not sure if I'm obsessive about images as a whole or more obsessed by images as translucent moments of time. I'm obsessed by the idea of slicing away time and making images transparent, making them a trace. But I can also be detached about images. In the main, photography only records melancholic, unimportant moments, but for me it's what these moments can become; to not just exist as singular memory but as a compression of a passage of time that reveals something about the true nature of photography... its surface.

It has been written that you "distill the meaning" of complex works, like Turner's oil paintings. Is this your intention?

I like that word "distill". If you mean do I try and grasp the essence of a particular work, fuck about with it on the computer and then display all the essence of a complete work on the wall, then that's exactly what I try and do.

Which theorists and philosophers who influence your work?

I have a friend who read so much philosophy and critical writing that he could never create something freely because he was always searching for answers from other thinkers' minds. Sometimes one should put the books down and just go with what one knows best. Or better still, just make art from the books you read that influence you. For me it's Freud, Nietzsche, Sontag, Barthes and Mohammed.

What else do you read?

My favourite short story of all time is *The Adventure of a Photographer* by Italo Calvino from his book *Difficult Loves*. It depicts a seemingly non-obsessive man's all-consuming obsession with capturing life through photographs. He's too engaged to even notice the interest of the beautiful woman acting as his subject. It ends with the most amazing sentence, and one that has influenced me, as you'll see: "Having exhausted every possibility at the moment when he was coming full circle Antonino realised that photographing photographs was the only course that he had left – or, rather, the true course he had obscurely been seeking all this time."

Music is a recurring theme of yours.

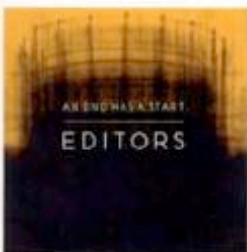
Do you listen to it while you work?
I always have music on while I work. I get quite obsessive about listening to the piece of music that I'm making an image from. And if I'm not making an image based on music then I like listening to all types of stuff. Recently I've been loving techno, but also the new Mark Ronson and Interpol albums.

Your work featured on the covers of the recent Editors' album and single. Did you create the image especially for them?

When the band first approached me, they wanted to use some of the first images I made in this way – the ones using Bernd and Hilla Becher's photos of gas towers. I told them bluntly there was no way I would let them use my art that way, but I would like to create something new for them to use. They were up for it, so I made an image from the gas tower on Regent's Canal. I enjoyed it, and it opens my work up to a whole new audience.

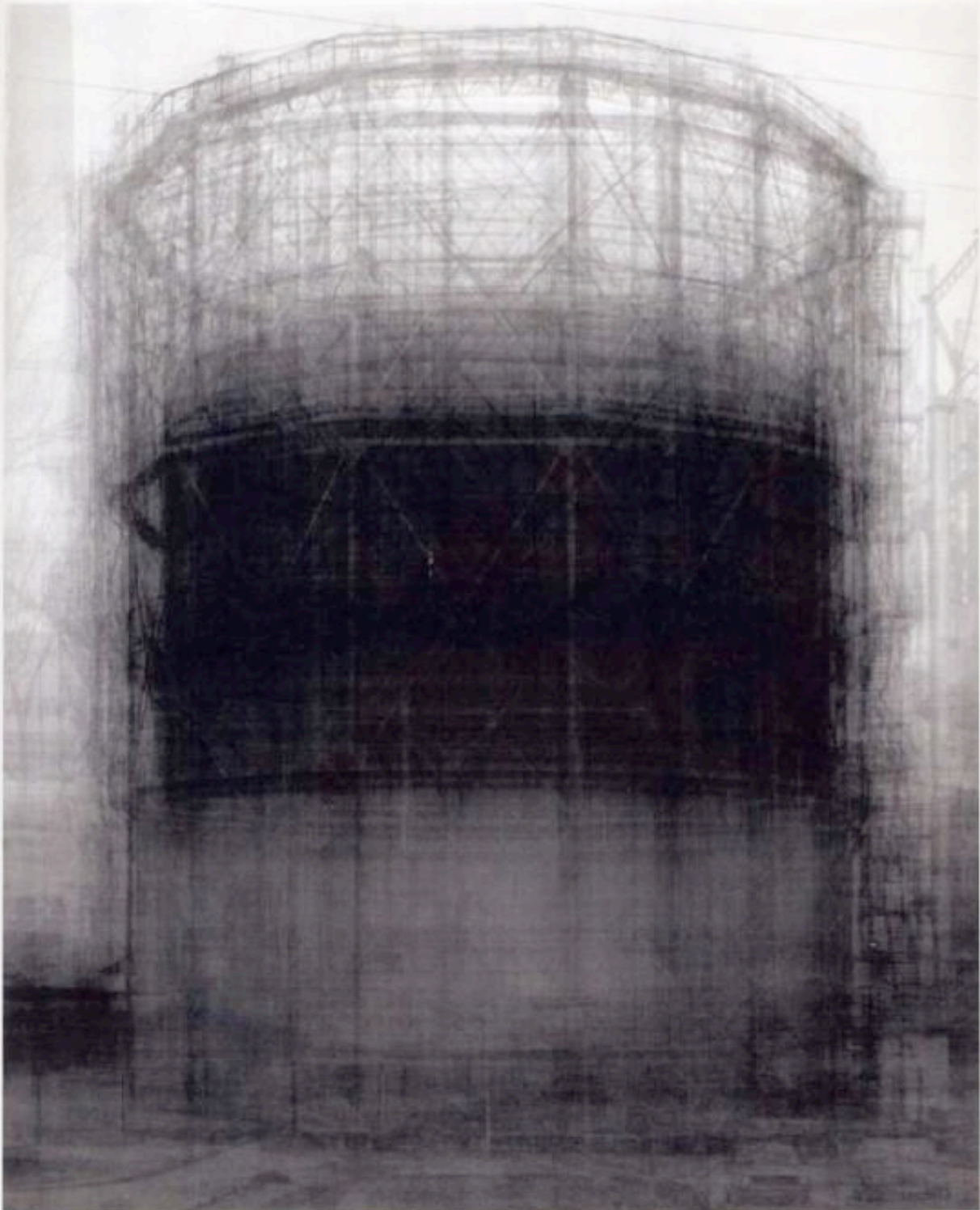
Finally, if you could live with any work of art ever made, what would it be?

The Ardabil Carpet from the Jameel Collection at the Victoria and Albert Museum. That thing is amazing! ☺

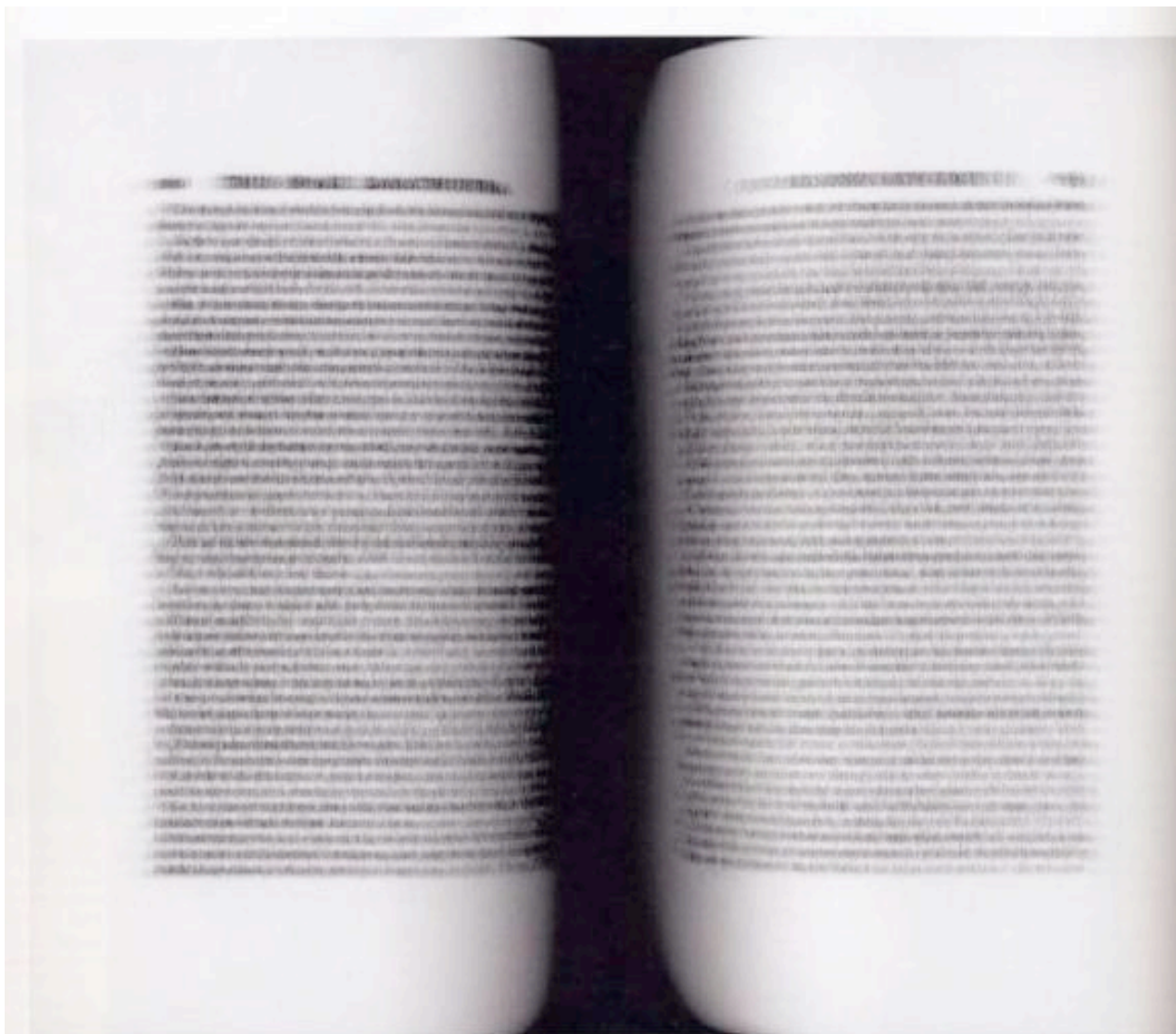


- 1 Caravaggio... *The Final Years* (2006) installation view, Victoria Miro Gallery, digital C-print mounted on aluminium, 236.2 x 177.8cm
- 2 Last Three Piano Sonatas... *After Franz Schubert* (2007) on-set film still
- 3 Editors, *An End Has a Start* (2007), album cover

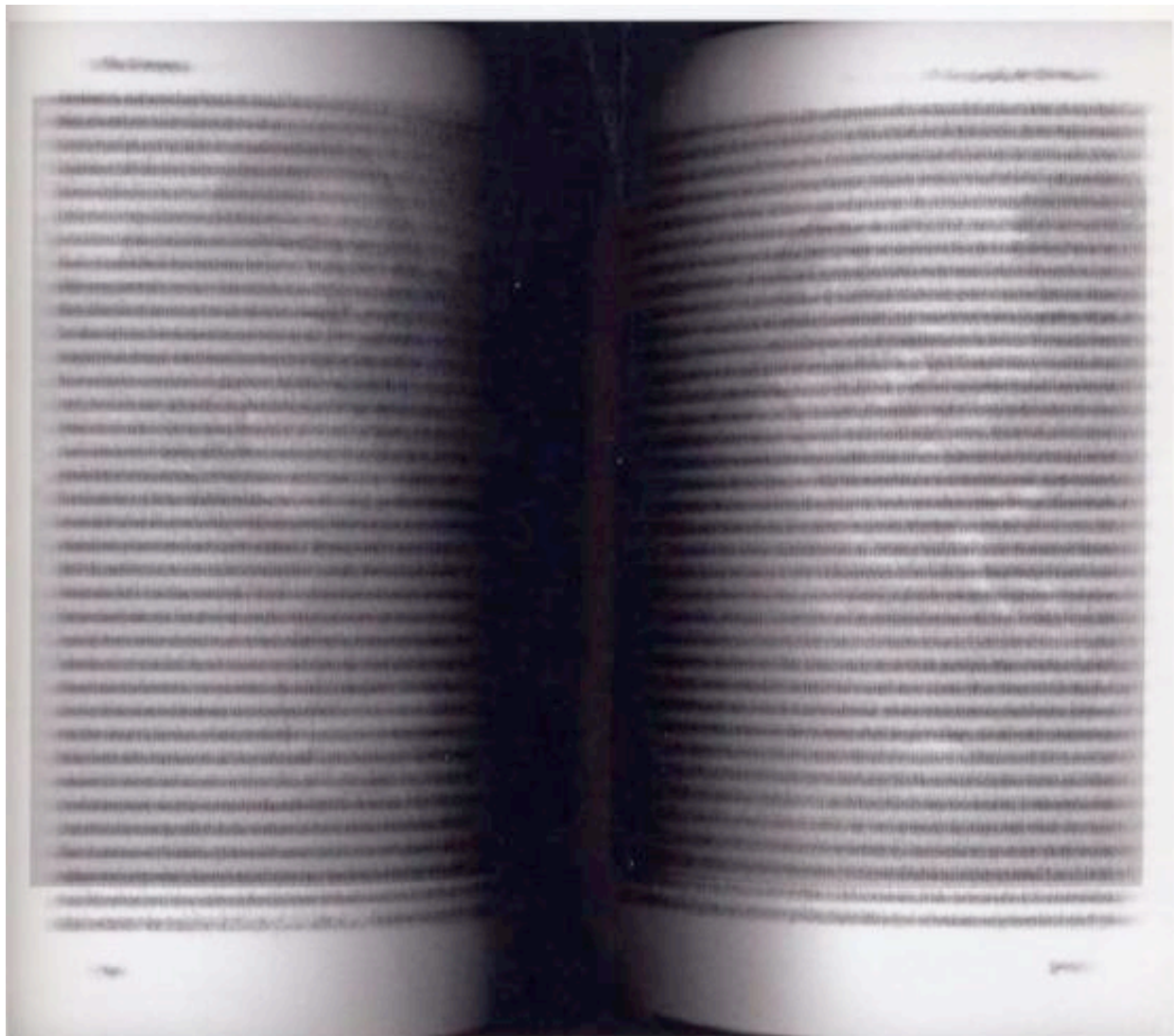
CV Born: 1978, Birmingham, UK Studied: University of Derby; Royal College of Art, London Lives and works: London Represented: Victoria Miro, London



Spiral Gasholders... An Homage to Bernd Becher (2007), digital bronze print, 61 x 50.8 cm



Friedrich Nietzsche...Thus Spake Zarathustra (2007), digital C-print mounted on aluminum, 177.8 x 205.7cm



Sigmund Freud's 'The Uncanny' (2006), digital C-print mounted in aluminum, 177.8 x 215.5 cm