

# frieze



*The Rose Gardens*  
(display: II) (III)  
2007  
Lambda print  
152x122 cm



# Still Life

American writer A.M. Homes talks to British artist Sarah Jones about photography, film, memory, roses, psychoanalysis, women and hair

*A.M. Homes: I first 'met' Sarah Jones, when I visited the exhibition 'Another Girl, Another Planet' at New York's Lawrence Rubin Greenberg Van Doren Gallery in New York, in 1999. Her photographs were rich with colour, and psychological tension, and fixated upon hair, identity and home. I met Sarah several years later at an artists' colony in upstate New York and we became friends, e-pals, chatting across continents and around the world, about our work and what it means to be a woman and an artist, and how we would like first and foremost to be known simply as artists. She is deeply serious, sees life with a 'Technicolor, X-ray vision all her own. I'm fascinated talking with her and hearing about what catches her eye or draws her in. We talked for hours – here is part of our conversation.*

**A.M. Home** In some ways your photographs are like musical compositions. There is a sense of time suspended and time stretching out in your photographs, which is kind of magical.

**Sarah Jones** I think the sense of something being at once frozen yet able to expand is quite musical. In early photographic portraits, people were literally clamped to chairs in order to remain motionless for long exposures. Photography allows us to scrutinize something; like putting a glass dish over a specimen to look more closely at it. I'm really interested in what can be expressed with the most limited of means or well chosen vocabulary. My background in dance influences me too. During my recent fellowship at the National Media Museum (in Bradford, UK), I was looking at the stereoscopic photographs; I'm interested in the slight shifts from one image to the next. It made me think of how the lens sees the world. I started photographing my new work in a municipal rose garden, from the front and back. I wanted one to be the mirror of the other and to be able to 'measure' what I saw or imagined. The photographs revealed how distance from camera to subject to viewer can affect the image, how actual space related to photographic space and how light defines this. There was a feeling of being able to grab hold of a subject and it slipping away. Perhaps photography allows us to daydream; reverie is where time seems to stretch out.

**AMH** Do you compose or conceptualize, for lack of a better word, in language, images or colours?

**SJ** I often start by taking snapshots, sketches, and see what they might suggest or I think of the books I've read recently or films I've seen, or something I remember. My work is built on the idea of a world that has its own rules, its own fiction. I have particular ideas that I want to explore; at the moment they concern the notion of mirroring, both as an act of photographing something and as a term related to psychoanalysis, to how we might behave with one another, or how also we might view an image, a portrait. Jean Cocteau's *Orphée* (1950) influenced my thinking here also – a parallel imagined world. When you look closely at one subject – like the roses or the couch or an analyst's office – something can suddenly fall into place. It's how a choreographer might construct a dance, or a composer might compose music; taking one gesture as a motif to build upon. It's a similar thing for me with photography, constructing an image out of something that's already there. Later, there may be a fine-tuning of sentences or nuances; the lighting and the composition are very specific in my work.

**AMH** When you end up with one image, are there others that are slight variations?

**SJ** Yes, but I use the one work that suggests how to go forward.

**AMH** Do you ever go back and reshoot?

**SJ** Yes, but sometimes it's not possible. You might return the next day to a park and the trees have been felled! We're all familiar with the idea of photography freezing something. I was remembering, as a child, seeing how long I could hold my breath for, and in a sense that's both to freeze the world and also perhaps to freeze yourself within the world. I think that's what I do with my photographs.

**AMH** When you're a child, your world changes so much more quickly than it does when you're an adult.

**SJ** My little girl was telling me that sometimes, as she is trying to fall asleep, everything in her head seems to be moving at a fast speed, all her thoughts, collections of images, whilst around her, in the physical world, things seem to be in slow motion. It made me think how there's often so much to take in, to make sense of, and I think people use photography to try to isolate a moment or an experience.

**AMH** To control something until you're able to really go back and process it or look at it, or understand what it is.

**SJ** Yes. I was looking at one of the rose prints this morning and thinking about the effect of the lighting I have used. The light falls on the foreground, on the first couple of planes, which makes the subject feel as though it's been pushed to the surface of the photographic space, isolating the subject; it reminds me of pressed flowers. I remember finding some in a second-hand novel once. When you open the page, you've got that double-take – something picked, a totem, up against language, fiction. It made me think about the photograph as a keepsake, the way that pressed flowers are.

**AMH** How did you become a photographer?

**SJ** My first degree was in art and dance. I painted a lot, sometimes transcribing photographs; I didn't enjoy the theatre world as I like working alone, so I ended up in the darkroom. I like photography's limitations. I'm interested in the very specific language of the photograph, how it relates to experience, to the real, the everyday.

**AMH** What kind of dance were you interested in?

**SJ** Contemporary.

**AMH** Do you still have that interest?

**SJ** I go and see it, but I've lost any fantasy about dancing again.

**AMH** Could you ever see yourself doing some sort of performance-based work?

**SJ** Not presently.

**AMH** Why not?

**SJ** I'm interested in perhaps moving to film but I always come back to the still. There's so much more I want to explore with that.

**AMH** I think that in a lot of your images there's a real sense of gesture.

**SJ** I was interested in dancers and choreographers who use everyday gestures in their work, which was a relatively new thing when I was studying; choreographers like Pina Bausch. The group of girls I started photographing when I was at Goldsmiths doing an MA from 1994–6 (the 'Francis Place' / 'Mulberry Lodge' series) use gestures that are quite naturalistic but also there's a sense of awkwardness; the locations effect our reading of them. There's a sense of the uncanny in those rooms and the figures are both comfortable and ill at ease. They're at a point of change; their adolescence.

§7 Photography is always associated historically with the idea of the death of the moment, or the lost moment, but it's odd because a photograph is also a permanent document of a lost moment.

**AMH** How important is memory in your work?

§7 Memory always slips away from us; each time you go back to it, it has changed, perhaps our relationship with that memory may have altered. A psychiatrist I met at Bellevue Hospital Center in New York was talking about the layout of her therapy rooms. I'd never seen rooms like this before. They didn't seem institutional. They were stripped back, but she'd hung cloth on the walls, introduced plaster casts of Greek columns, benches and paintings, an electric organ in one room. Everything was well-worn, like a stage set made from discarded objects. She described how the people that she sees have been in and out of institutions for many years, and their memories are sometimes completely locked down, and if they were to arrive in an institution that looked like every other institution, nothing would ever change. So she hopes that in using these rooms as props something might be opened or unlocked. It made me think about memory, about the way it can unlock something. It's the same with the couches. In a sense they're very straightforward photographs, but you don't always see the actual couch; it's the idea of a couch, which refers to other couches in other places. Perhaps this is the effect of the formal compositional structure that I use in photographing them, the flatness of the space. It allows for a different kind of interaction.

**AMH** What is your interest in psychoanalysis and couches?

§7 The first psychoanalyst's couch I photographed was over ten years ago, when I was doing my MA. It came from my response to the theory I was being taught. I was interested in what would happen if you pictured the place where psychoanalysis was carried out, and where people might re-live experience in order to loosen the grip their past has on them. I was interested in what relationship the image of the couch might have to this. All of the early couches I photographed are at the British Institute of Psychoanalysis. The head of the institute was fascinating. He spoke about how patients in the room often imagine the presence of a third person, and he suggested that the camera could be like this third eye; an onlooker, an audience. This then unfolded a whole way of photographing the couches, which developed into photographing the girls and the roses and the trees, and my relationship to photography.

**AMH** There's such a huge difference between theory and what happens on the analyst's couch. Do you think you'll finish with the couch at some point?

§7 I've started a new series that includes an image of a red couch, which signals a departure in that I've titled it *Analyst (Couch) (I)* (2007) whereas the other photographs are titled as rooms, such as *Consulting Room (Couch) (I to XXI)*. The word analyst might refer to a protagonist, or a re-telling. Also colour is more important. I recently made a group of photographs titled 'Colony (Couch)' of beds in respective studios at Yaddo Artists, Colony. These refer obliquely to the analyst couches too. An analyst's room to me is like a mystery with certain codes and signals; there are certain conventions made manifest. I think that one of the reasons I've been interested in photographing them is because of the sense of ritual and place.



**Above:**

*Analyst (Couch) (I)*  
2007 Lambda print  
122 x 122 cm

**Below:**

*Arrangement (Analyst) (I)*  
2007  
Lambda print  
61 x 61 cm

**Opposite:**

*Consulting Room (I)*  
1995  
C-type print  
150 x 150 cm

**AMH** In a funny way, because it's ritualized and mythologized, what goes on is an ethereal, psychic thing you can't even see.

§7 A curator, Jeremy Lewison, asked me to photograph his mother's couch. She was an analyst and had recently died; it was very strange being in her space. It was like a memorial to her but was soon to be dismantled, as they were selling the house. I suddenly was aware of the great weight of the photograph being the only thing that would remain of that room. It took me a long time to make something I felt was in some way meaningful, given the context. The work became about the light in the room, how it fell on the couch.

**AMH** I remember, when my grandmother died, I photographed everything in her house. She used to sit on her couch all day, and where she sat, the carpet had worn away. It was the strangest thing. This woman has lived in a place for a very long time, and then suddenly she doesn't return.

§7 Some of the couches that I photograph are well lived-in; they may just be couches, but their history is revealed very quickly in the imprint of the bodies of the people who have lain on them.

**AMH** How do analysts feel about their couches? What is their relationship to their own couch? Are they aware of it?

§7 Before I came to New York I was given lots of email addresses of analysts and I asked them to describe their couch, their rooms, the lighting and very particular details. When I arrived to photograph the rooms, though, they looked very different from how I had imagined them. The couches were often sagging and worn, bearing testament to the analyst having practised for many years. I became interested in the idea of still life through talking to analysts; and have been making some new work around this; the arrangement of objects in the rooms, the possible narratives and associations.

**AMH** It's interesting to me when people have been in practice for a long time and you walk into the waiting room, and it's full of books from 1967.

§7 Apparently any change in an analyst's room can be disruptive for the patient. One analyst told me that many of his patients would know immediately if something had disappeared or been moved.

**AMH** I wonder what most patients look at while they're talking?

§7 I made a number of photographs of the ceiling; I wanted to photograph what a patient might see whilst lying on the couch, and the light on it at certain times of day. I was also thinking about what Sigmund Freud says about analysis, about a 'talking out' of the body; lying on the couch facilitating this.

**AMH** Where did the blue you use so much come from?

§7 It's like the pleasure of certain colours, perhaps, or how they have been used historically – blue to indicate the Sublime, or distance in Renaissance painting.



William Gass' book *On Being Blue: A Philosophical Inquiry* (1976) has influenced me. A recent work around the colour blue is titled *Cove* (virtual film studio) (I) (2007). The location is an infinity cove painted in chroma-key blue, normally used to map on locations after filming, but in photographing it something else happens, and it becomes about the surface of the walls and the layers of painting. As a location it refers to the idea of illusion or allusion. I'm interested in the surface of the photograph in relationship to this.

**AMH** Are there things that you think about that are relevant to understanding your work?

**SJ** My practice stretches over a long time, and the images are very much part of an ongoing exploration. So much of my work is about the portraits. Even if there isn't literally a figure, it's referred to, in the couches, the marks on the wall or how the viewer might experience the rose garden images. I'm really interested in the small shifts that happen from picture to picture.

**AMH** I find it harder to track small shifts, but I think it's very rare to see something only once in the course of a career.

**SJ** You're dealing with the image but also trying to find something in it that might convey a feeling or a concept; something you're trying to understand or have yet to articulate. In my latest show my work continues to be about formal concerns such as measuring, photographic space and systems, light, and about pleasure, more than it's ever been. I realize also, for all of that, the work is a little uneasy, has an unsettling effect, but I'm not entirely sure why. There is perhaps a gap between the document and meaning: a separation.

**AMH** I think there's a mysterious underplay in your photographs. They're never just an image of a thing. They're the thing plus something we can't possess or really articulate.

**SJ** I wonder if it's partly to do with the layering that goes on in the image. Although flowers have been used for centuries in art, I'm interested in what you can add to them as a subject. The roses are quite ordinary, they're in a park near my studio. I photographed them during the day but allude to the

night, because of the way that they are lit, the way they have been recorded on film.

**AMH** How do you do that?

**SJ** I shoot with big studio lights, brightly exposing the flowers so that the background falls away, so any context or specific location disappears. I love that, bringing the subject right to the foreground.

**AMH** What kind of camera are you using?

**SJ** A 5 x 4, large-format camera.

**AMH** What's your film stock of choice?

**SJ** I've spent ages trying to find the right film, the right range, contrast and density. I used to work with one type of film stock that is no longer made, which completely devastated me. I had to move up to 5 x 4 format for the same luminosity and sharpness.

**AMH** I'm not conscious of how a choice of a lens or format effects what I'm seeing, and yet it does so profoundly.

**SJ** Absolutely, and working with the large-format camera is so different; you have to tilt your idea of the world to take photographs with a large format, so already your subject's on its head.

**AMH** How do you decide what the appropriate size of the images is?

**SJ** I want my work to be in some way a surrogate for the actual; often the scale of the image relates to life size. My work is both documentary and imagined. If you have a measurement system, then perhaps you're able to equate certain things.

**AMH** What is the system?

**SJ** I photograph things front-on with as little direction or intervention as possible; it's about stripping everything right back, in a Beckett-like way. If you strip language as far back as you can, strangely, there's often more of it. I want to reveal the workings or truth of something, and that's the starting-point. I think this is built into the history of photography, which is very much about social context, order and cataloguing – how, also, it was put to use in institutions.

**AMH** The history of photographic portraiture is intense but brief, unlike painting.

**SJ** With the 'Actor' series in 1995 I was trying to unravel what a photographic



*The Park (II)*, 2002, C-type print, 130 x 170 cm



portrait is, so I titled the portraits 'actor'. It was a way of describing my relationship to photography in our lives. I offered the actors six gestures, drawn from a Piero della Francesca painting. When I was in art school, photography was seen as a liberator; painters no longer had to paint figuratively, because photography's promise was that it could describe the world truthfully. In contemporary practice we're now examining photography's relationship to the notion of the real.

**AMH** Do you think the camera has a sense of perception that's different to that of the photographer? That it betrays you?

**§7** Often it does things that I hadn't realized it would do.

**AMH** Are there times you're surprised or caught off-guard by what appears that you hadn't conceptualized?

**§7** Yes. As with the roses, they look so different in a photograph; perhaps it's like holding an object up to the light, turning it in your hand, to attempt to know it better?

**AMH** It's interesting, the idea that when you make the image, when you look at it, it could turn out to violate the rules relating to what it was and what you thought you were doing.

**§7** You think you know something, then it moves out of the illusion of the space into a photographic, cinematic space. We've learnt different ways of seeing through photography and cinema.

**AMH** Can you talk more about the role of narrative in your work?

**§7** I'm interested in how a narrative is constructed, even within very formal structures, and in carrying motifs across works. I think photography leaves this gap where the viewer can bring their own narrative and experience to the image.

**AMH** What is it about hair that interests you?

**§7** I recently met a woman on the street who had long hair piled up on top of her head like a nest, and it reminded me of my new roses, which are visceral, spindly and beautiful, in bloom but slightly diseased. Hair has a resonance in the locations in which I put the people who I photograph – the edges of urban parks, or places that are unkempt – so there's a relationship to the location and figure as an allegory; hair as nature gone slightly mad.

**AMH** What is the power of long hair?

**§7** It's been associated in art history with death, mortality and sexuality, but having extremely long hair in the face of the speed of modern life could be seen as an affectation.

**AMH** What work by other artists do you revisit?

**§7** There's work that I revisit a lot, in the same way that I do with my own work. I'm both reassured and slightly uneasy when I look at something again. I was looking at some Edward Stieglitz photographs, and the way that he photographs the landscape, the light in his pictures, is fantastic. I often return to Diane Arbus' work. I've looked at Lee Friedlander too quite a lot recently. He photographed the rose gardens at Yaddo. It's interesting how different artists look at the same place and get something very different from it.

**AMH** What other kinds of things do you look at?

**§7** One of Edward Hopper's last paintings, *Sunlight in an Empty Room* (1963), has influenced my work recently and I've been looking at Gustav Klimt again. The Mark Rothko room, now at Tate Modern, is really important to me. His paintings are so powerful. When my father died, a long time ago, I spent a lot of time in that room.

**AMH** We have one too, in the National Gallery of Art in Washington. I spent forever sitting there.

**§7** It's extraordinary, limiting your palette to such an extent, painting and repainting the same formal structure – and yet his paintings are so powerful.



**Cove (virtual film studio) (I)**  
2007  
Lambda print  
122 x 122 cm



**The Living Room (Curtain) (I)**  
2003  
C-type print  
150 x 150 cm

Complex and moving. How did he do that?

**AMH** It is what it is, and it's not what it is; it's something more.

*A.M. Homes is the author of numerous books, including her memoir, *The Mistress's Daughter* (2007) and the novel *This Book Will Save Your Life* (2006). She writes frequently on art and collaborated with photographer Bill Owens on his new book *Bill Owens*, published by Damiani Press (2008).*

*Sarah Jones lives in London. Her work is included in 'Street & Studio: An Urban History of Photography' at Tate Modern until 31 August, and 'The Society of London Ladies', a group exhibition at Dispari & Dispari in Reggio Emilia in Italy until 24 June, 2008. She has also recently been awarded The Meredith. S. Moody Photography Residency at the Yaddo Artists' Colony in Saratoga Springs, New York.*