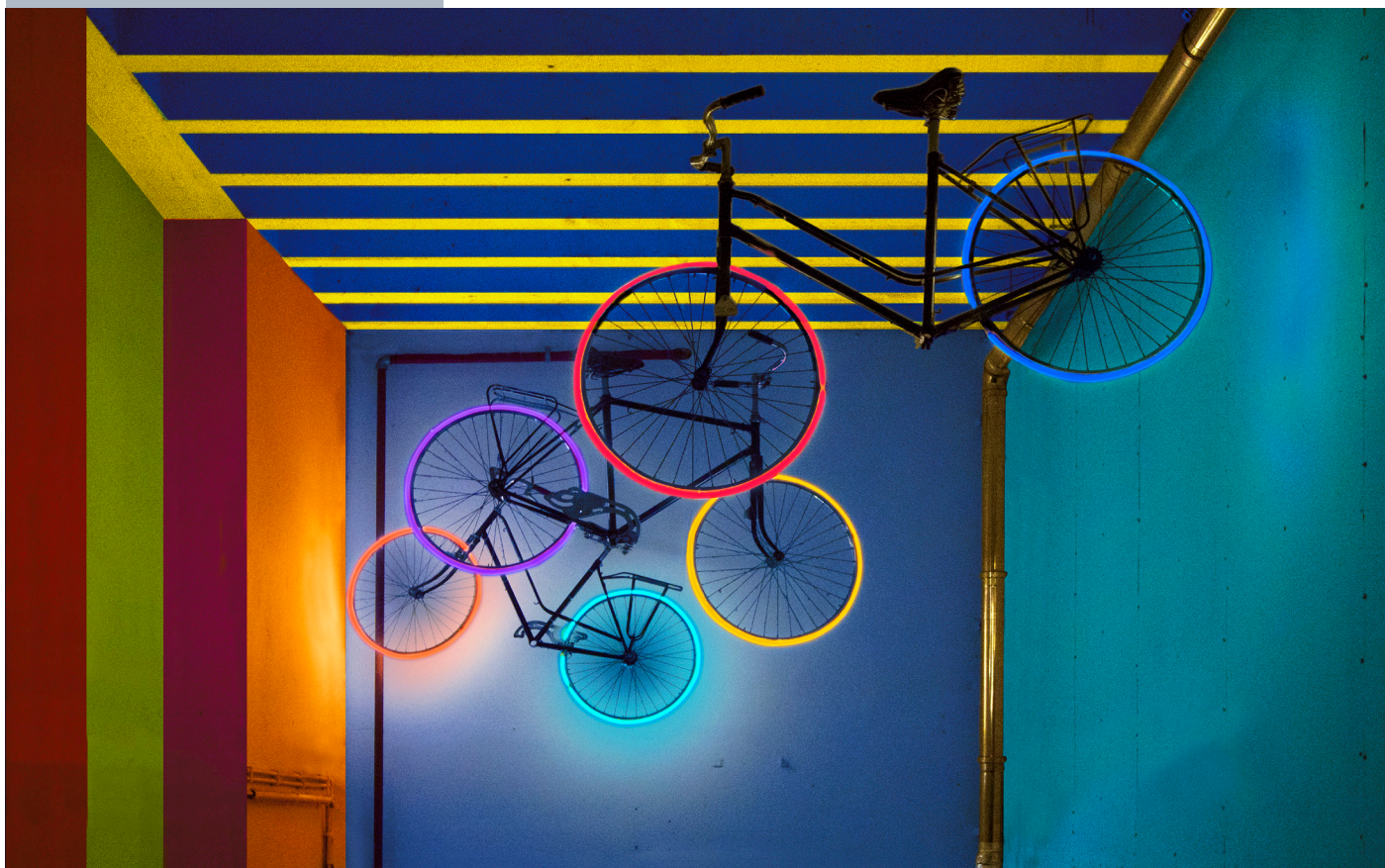# *True Colours*

Composition 447, "Bike Lights" (2019)
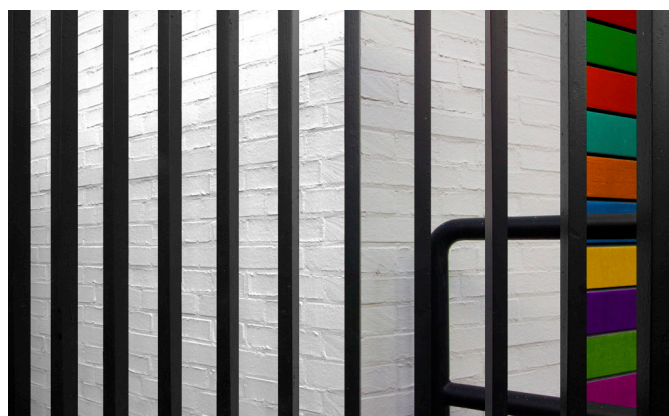
by Christopher Cristóbal Newberry

True Colours

An exhibition by Christopher Cristóbal Newberry:

Composition 447, "Bike Lights"

Exhibition continues upstairs in Photographers' Gallery

Sales: 07717222397

Truth, Truthiness, Verisimilitude and Plain Old Lies: Showing the True Colours

- Christopher Cristóbal Newberry

Stephen Colbert popularised the word 'truthiness' in 2005. (Fig 1)

Composition 023 by the author is an example of 'verisimilitude'. It looks like reality . . . but notice the shape of the island. Is anything in nature <u>so</u> symmetrical? Its purpose is to create an imperfect ideal. (Fig 2)

In the post-truth world the media and social media is full of fake news. Fake news can only work if it <u>seems</u> real. (Fig 3)

Truthiness and Post-Truth

In 2005 the American Dialect Society's word of the year was "truthiness". The American comedian and political satirist, Stephen Colbert, *(Fig 1)* came up with a spoof term for "the quality of preferring concepts or facts one wishes to be true, rather than facts or concepts known to be true". That is 'truthiness'. Fast forward 10 years and The Oxford Dictionary nominated 'post-truth' as its word of the year, defining it as: "relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief". Both terms refer to modern times

In essence 'truthiness' and 'post-truth' refer to a strong in-built human tendency to believe what one wants to believe, in accordance to one's feelings, despite evidence to the contrary. In my opinion, some of the results of this tendency are religion, nationalism, racism, elitism and many, many more. Truthiness and post-truth are modern concepts, but they are highlighting something that has long existed.

Truth, Lies and Something In Between: Verisimilitude

The words "truth", "lies" and "verisimilitude" on the other hand, have been around for a very long time.

According to the Cambridge Dictionary:

Truth is "the actual fact or facts about a matter". In truth there are no "alternative facts", as Kellyanne Conway once put it in a press conference.

The opposite is a lie: "something that someone says or writes which they know is untrue in order to deceive someone". It's done on purpose to deceive.

And in between there is verisimilitude: "the quality of <u>seeming</u> true or of having the appearance of being real". From the Latin, 'veritas' (truth) and 'similitudo' (similar): Similar to truth . . . but not truth. This concept can apply to art, novels, films and, in my case, images derived from photography. *(Figs 2 and 3)*

Fairyland

The Cottingley fairies story was a lie *(Fig 4)*, intended to deceive. Perhaps not maliciously, perhaps it all started as a joke. In 1917 two little girls went to the back of their garden and took pictures of themselves with playful fairies. The fairies were cardboard cut-outs. The girls showed the pictures to their parents claiming that fairies were real. Their mother believed them. She took the photos to the Theosophical Society which happily accepted the photos as conclusive proof that there is a spiritual world. These were no nincompoops. Among their members was the creator of the most rational and intelligent of characters, Sherlock Holmes. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle *(Fig 5)* took the pictures as evidence that it was possible to communicate with the spiritual world. He even gave public lectures on the photographs. To our modern eyes, they are obviously fake photos, but back in 1917 after more than 3 years of a devastating war where had millions died, many, many people had the desperate need of believing that their dead loved ones still somehow survived as spirits. Conan Doyle himself had lost his eldest son and only brother to the war. The girls' little white lie led to large numbers of people losing control over the truth. It happens now too.

Blood Moon

In early 2019 there was a Blood Moon, a phenomenon, where the full moon appears very large and red during a lunar eclypse. Some people take this phenomenon as a sign that the end of the world is soon to come. I noticed that there were a lot of fake photos being circulated on social media and as a joke, I published one of my own. I used the same basic technique as the girls in Cottingley: one real and one false image superimposed on each other. I used a photo I had taken of Dieppe harbour and a picture of a blood moon downloaded from the Internet. I put the two together (cleverly creating the reflection of the moon on the water) and – voilà – a fake *(Fig6)*. I posted it on Facebook, fully thinking people would have a good laugh. To my amazement, a lot of people believed the image to be true. I honestly thought people would see immediately it was fake. Many didn't. I got lots of compliments. I deliberately set out to deceive, so it was a lie – joke or not. However, this image is an exception to my work. My works are verisimilitudes, based on truth with the purpose of exposing 'truthiness' and lies. They are not lies.

In 1917 two girls took pictures of themselves with cardboard fairies – people believed it. (Fig 4)

Having lost a son in the Great War, Arthur Conan Doyle was a spiritualist who firmly believed that the Cottingley fairies photo was genuine. (Fig 5)

This image by the author is not meant to be 'verisimilar', but a lie. Its purpose is to deceive while purporting to express reality. (Fig 6)

The camera doesn't lie??

In the past people used to say, "the camera doesn't lie". The Cottingley girls showed us that the camera certainly can lie. When creating an image, I start off with the truth: objects that in fact exist. When light hits these objects, it bounces off of them and into our eyes. Usually, reflected light tells us that an object is there so we don't trip over it or bang into it. If we can see the object with our eyes and touch it, we know it is real – it is factually there. If the objects are lit, a camera can pick up their reflection on film or image sensors. When viewed we can say that the resulting image is 'truthful'. Depending on the shapes, forms, colours and composition we can think of those truthful images as beautiful, ugly or, perhaps, mundane – uninteresting. Take a car park.

Car parks and verisimilitude

Car parks on the whole are not beautiful objects. This one in Bruges was certainly not a thing of beauty, but it did have bicycles dangling from the ceiling with neon lights as wheels, so I took an interest. Then I photographed the scene and the resulting image is 'truth'. *(Fig 7)* It is not the object itself, but a truthful reflection of the object. However, then I transformed the image *(Fig 8)*: I straightened and made the lines perfectly horizontal and vertical, changed the colours, got rid of superfluous objects such as pipes and straps. *(Fig 9)* Then, the image becomes more and more abstract, but conserving a degree of verisimilitude: There really are 3 bicycles in a room with pipes. That much is true, but bicycles don't usually float (nor do the 'dancers' upstairs in this exhibition), so the image is verisimilar. The image becomes idealised with its almost perfect shapes and saturated colours – many of them complementary.

Verisimilitude: Not truth, but not lies

The difference between the "True Colours" images shown here in the Spotlight and in the Photographer's Gallery upstairs is that these are not intended to deceive, whereas the Cottingley fairies and my 'blood moon' are lies. Regarding truth, photography used to be regarded as trustworthy compared to other forms of visual communication, such as painting. With digital photography all vestige of trustworthiness is gone. A photograph may or not tell the truth. Today we are being bombarded constantly with fake news, "alternative facts" and truthiness: all intended to mislead or obfuscate. As a society we have been
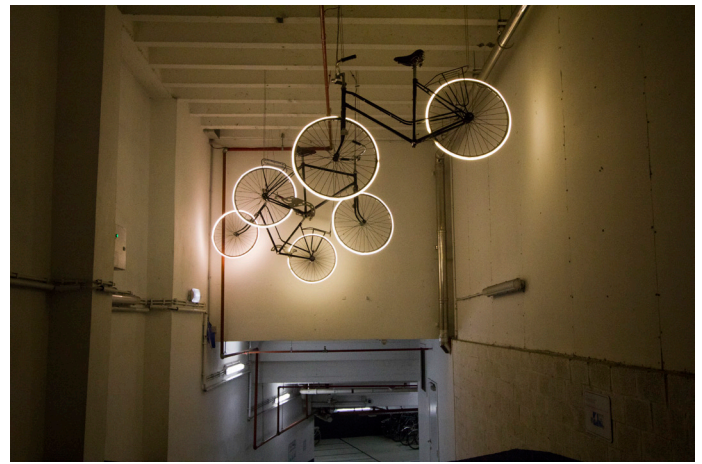
Starting off with the truth: A rather mundane entrance to a car park with 3 bicycles dangling from the ceiling. (Fig 7)
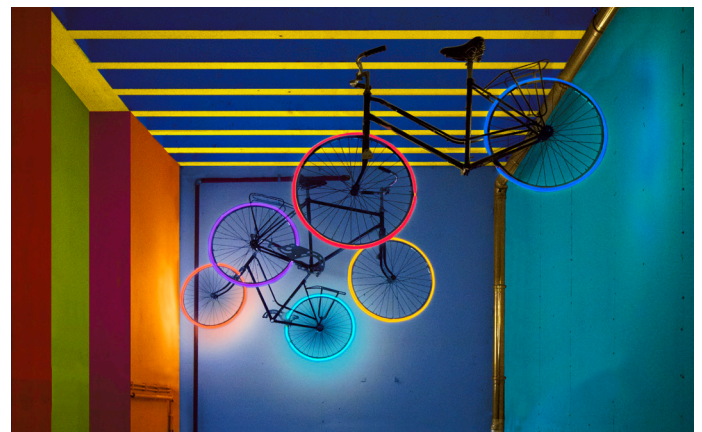
While conserving a degree of verisimilitude, the image is now almost abstract, missing superfluous objects that hinder. (Fig 8)

Detail – Before and after: Lines have been straightened, colours have been changed and saturated, and superfluous objects such as pipes and straps have been eliminated, creating the illusion that the bicycles float. Illusions like this are to be seen both in the Spotlight and in the Photographer's Gallery upstairs where "True Colours" continues. (Fig 9)

misinformed by politicians, media, social media, religious groups and whatnot. I am hoping that my images may contribute in two ways: First, to remind viewers that truth should be questioned and verified. Secondly, to please the eye with bigger than life colour and idealised shapes and forms.

In 1817, referring to the verisimilitude of novels, Coleridge invented the term: "Suspension of disbelief": To enjoy a novel one must forget it is fiction – at least while being read. I ask the viewer to not suspend disbelief, but enjoy the image while knowing that, whatever it is, it's not truth. I'm pulling at the heartstrings, through the neurons of the mind. I hope.