

Penelope Richardson CONFESS

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Penelope Richardson's site-specific installation *Confess* at Counihan Gallery Melbourne, uses a globalised aesthetic of decay to heighten our awareness of a vernacular associated with displacement. The people and dwellings *Confess* is comprised of, represent everything from demolished buildings and displaced peoples to feral subcultures. This new body of work combines Richardson's investigation and experience of street culture; a portraiture styled methodology towards her subjects and an idiosyncratic use of collage techniques to pictorially represent the experience of alternative living conditions. It is an exhibition that audiences with experiences of living in intense urban locations will readily understand. Importantly for Richardson it is an aesthetic that combines her personalised response with stylistic conventions that render a peculiar authenticity of her own experience of the intensity of urban living in various locations around the world.

Each of the photographic works is comprised of a classically centred figure, with their face and head visually obstructed. In some works both the head and face are completely covered over with hoods. In the background of each image, acting as both a backdrop and original piece of artwork, Richardson's *strangers* are positioned in front of artworks comprised of mixed media. The original piece of artwork acts as a backdrop in each image while maintaining its autonomy as a work of art. There is a curiosity to this relationship. On the one hand they use the language of newspaper visual imagery, specifically a documentary style with a seeming reportage

quality. Yet, Richardson has obviously intervened heavily in the construction of the picture, for example, having the subject hold out an extract of newspaper headline to obscure their face. Thus, the construction of the subject in each portrait, by both the artist and the sitter engages the performative nature of identity. And, at the same time, makes us aware of the ability of us all to manufacture visual representations of ourselves. (The basis of advertising and filmmaking). Using the hood as a mask, Richardson intervenes in the usual popular cultural function of such imagery and experience and subverts it into a critique of itself.

As images the works communicate a fictionalised, quasi-factual aesthetic. Trading on this quality they suggest a visual record of illicit activity within an urban environment. In obscuring the face, in most instances rendering it completely unrecognisable, Richardson moves away from the sense of the individualised self and toward the negotiation of collective, urban identities. The gesture, setting and costume work against a literal reading of her intention. The images use reality to fictionalise the construction of subcultures.

Perhaps the most intriguing quality of this installation is Richardson's play with reality and fiction in connection with subculture. Her almost anthropological approach to the subject provides viewers an opportunity to imagine *their* place in *their* urban environment and to do so within the anonymity afforded by living in the metropolis.

Lisa Byrne, 2005.

'Some people will do anything to keep themselves from being moved.' Susan Sontag

Artist Statement:

It is on about the sixteenth day of clipping that I ask myself why I am obsessively cutting images of atrocities and war from a pile of newspapers I have collected in my studio. These media images have a consistency – mourning women holding weeping children, politicians in suits, soldiers, tanks, checkpoints and criminals. The characters occupy media bunkers, barren landscapes or piles of rubble, and represent the idea of global destruction. I pause to contemplate what it is about these images that attract my attention. Do I have a voyeuristic interest in the pain of others and the spectacle of tragedy? I know these images are not the only reality. I realise that on some level they are playing into a mythic and psychological realm that is present within all of us. Perhaps they represent something wild and chaotic in the psyche and for this their drama holds me.

It is the human movement and drama in these images that holds an audience – the refugees, dispossessed and forlorn. The media relies on this, but without a public these images would hold no currency. At some level we are all complicit. Perhaps these representations play into an unconscious human fear of loss and chaos and also imply the impotence of the lone individual in the face of power and the war machine. I am exploring a human response to these representations

of reality using the poetics of drawing and photography. The more the village globalises the significance of ones' own community and, therefore, self in that community come into question. Using this aesthetic of decay I am attempting to explore and intentionally blur the boundary between the 'real' of the media and 'imagined' of the individual.

In the drama of now I ask myself where my liberal secular humanist values fit as fundamental beliefs become more convincing in politics. The politic of war distorts humanism as a category because liberal ideas of justice and democracy are being used to wage war. I will not be tricked into believing a fundamental model that is contrary to the values with which I was brought up.

Long gone are days of me believing that an artist can affect an outcome outside the bounds of art. This realisation brings with it an awareness of the artists' life where the studio becomes both a place of contemplation and action. In this work I try to make a link between the global dispossessed and the local environment. It is a response to these times. And, in agreement with the meek scrawl of a graffiti artist on a Fitzroy wall, I believe 'another world is possible', I just hope that we are careful about the one we choose to construct.

Penelope Richardson, 2005.

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Untitled. Photographic lambda print on aluminium, 50 x 50, 2005.



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