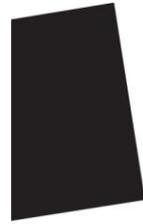


Roderick Buchanan, Sarah Jones,
Muzi Quawson & Poppy de Villeneuve
Essay by Martin Herbert
12 December 2008 – 7 February 2009



Bloomberg
SPACE

Opening times
Mon - Sat, 11:00 - 18:00

Bloomberg SPACE
50 Finsbury Square
London, EC2A 1HD

gallery@bloomberg.net

Within: New photographic portraits

“A little learning is a dangerous thing,” wrote Alexander Pope in his *Essay on Criticism* of 1709, just over a century prior to the invention of photography. Almost from the outset, this new technology gravitated towards portraiture, and it has gone on proving the legitimacy of the English poet’s axiom ever since. Photography, particularly portrait photography, turns us all into detectives. We scan for clues, project confidence or anxiety onto faces; we presume interior storms from momentary expressions captured in the lens. If we stop to consider that perhaps it’s the very process of being photographed that is causing these contortions, the conclusion isn’t enough. (Photographic portraiture carries some of the forceful claims to psychological insight of its direct predecessor, painted portraiture, and reducing it to a closed circuit or startle-reflex feels unacceptable, somehow.) So, we press on, gazing at strangers caught at split-seconds in the past, determined to know them.

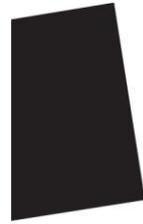
Some larger kind of hopefulness may lie at the heart of this resolve: an idea that humans are not unknowable, unpredictable, capricious beings, and that tools exist which can give us instant access to their deep regions. Intellectually, we know that the camera can lie and that people are not defined wholly by their visible aspects. But photography doesn’t so much advertise those facts as disguise them, and the human brain is a matchless meaning-making machine. *Within: New photographic portraits* features four diverse photographers working in the realm of portraiture, and in various ways each of them explores what it means to photograph people under such conditions of looking. Each knows that we’ll frequently seize on the little learning that tends to come attached to a photographic portrait: the subject’s name, their geographic location, their social group or affiliations. And that we’ll labour, dangerously and almost unconsciously, to harmonise that knowledge with what we read on faces and bodies, clothing and backdrops.

The exhibition title accordingly has a double meaning. It refers to the human networks (family, work, hobbyist choices, etc.) in which the photographic subjects move, and which threaten to define them within the terms of the photograph. But “within” refers, too, to the internal world, their deeper selves, which photography seeks to uncover and which may, ironically, be obscured by that other sense of the word. That dynamic, approached from multiple angles, is what’s explored here – along with the question of why we continue to make photographic portraits at all.

And there is another question in play; the issue of to what extent the individual actually exists, and to what extent – in life as well as in art – they are inexorably defined by the groups to which they belong, out of choice or accident. Austin Haner, for instance, is both ordinary and special, nobody and (now, through photography) somebody. Here he is alone, shot in black and white by Poppy de Villeneuve: a soft-haired, double-chinned teen in an E-One t-shirt, back to a brick wall and face to camera, a slightly defiant set to the lips and the faint lift of the muscles below the eyes. In the group photograph that unveils him as relatively unusual (he is one of sextuplets: here they all are, with Mum and Dad), Austin is at the back, head tilted slightly, and looking at him you have to wonder what it feels like to grow up in a big family without a pecking order, and to be teenage and so, you’d assume, with enough hormonal issues as it is. Wonder at that, and look at his brothers and sisters – how they’ve all, through clothes and hairstyles and assumed attitudes, made themselves look so distinct. How weight and, you’d reckon, intelligence have been so unevenly distributed.

Family will define Austin Haner’s life to an unusual extent, though it defines us all. How much of you is you, and how much is your parents, and how much do you share with siblings? How much do you get to be you, when someone knows you first as part of an unusual story? De Villeneuve’s work, with its fulsome emphasis, doesn’t so much answer these questions as shine torchlight on their frenetic complexity. De Villeneuve’s work here, with its hard frontality, monochrome aesthetic, conflation of the ordinary and atypical, and combination of group and solo shots, is strongly reminiscent of Walker Evans’ Depression-era portraits. The faces in them often look like masks of control, out of which small suggestions slip; the photographer is happy to get the mask, for what it reveals. Before long, we’ve built case histories. Brianna is bright and stays in a lot; Joshua likes to fight. The mother, front and centre with big limbs and indomitable eyebrows, is not to be trifled with. Possibly: physiognomy is a corrosive game, and portrait photography can often tell us more about what we can’t know than what we can.

We get their outward faces: the family as gang, and the individual as both representative of it and sole agent defending themselves

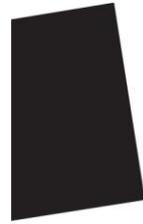


Bloomberg
SPACE

against it. But the photographer can, at other times, almost disappear, as in Muzi Quawson's photographs of a friend's family in Georgia, in the southern US. The style is fly-on-the-wall; within the rhetoric of photography, that means we tend to trust what we're seeing, and that the family members are being themselves. We get small, private moments: the mother serving food or pausing for a thoughtful smoke, a family member toting a shotgun in the yard. The latter is liable to have us projecting assumptions; other images, though, are liable to contradict them. While we can infer things about the family dynamic we glimpse – the son perpetually alone in a way that doesn't look wonderfully healthy, the wiry, lawn-patrolling grandfather the family backbone – Quawson's photographs of hard work on the land and lengthy stretches of nothing have an anthropological tilt that scales up. Though Georgia is historically a Democrat state, it was Republican-controlled when these photographs were taken and you might well look at this as Heartland America; and it is a borderline political act that Quawson's focuses in on it at a time – the twilight of Bush's America – when blunt preconceptions about Americans are legion.

At the same, though, we can't assume anything about the political biases of those pictured: a good part of photography is silence. And there is too much specificity in the photographs for them to be predominantly illustrative of some sociological thesis. They are unstable: they speak for a larger group, but are also both reducible to their details – e.g. the instructively querulous tilt of the grandfather's head as he observes something off-camera – and extensible outside their immediate context, speaking of the hard work and messy business of bringing up a family wherever you happen to have landed. That's part of photography's slippery power, you may think: its ability to speak about and beyond its subject on multiple registers, all at once, to confer value on anything.

Humans, we know, are always shuttling between wanting to belong – to dissolve into something larger – and wanting autonomy. It's a constant negotiation, between these two forms of 'within', and they can reaffirm each other: The outside can and will reshape the inside, as is strongly suggested by Roderick Buchanan's work. Here, facing the camera in formal attitude, is a middle-aged stranger, with pale skin and freshly washed hair and a pristine regimental costume that signals him as a member of a military band, a Loyalist flute group: the Black Skull Corps of Fife and Drum, Glasgow (est. 1981). The work is extracted from a larger project in which the Glasgow-based Buchanan, who has long explored how tribalism is sustained through cultural associations (e.g. the support of football teams), has filmed and photographed the Loyalist and Republican marching bands in working-class Glasgow. The work's still centre is its refusal of position, allowing the imagery to resonate. We see sadness, fortitude and pride in the face of the aforementioned sitter, but he



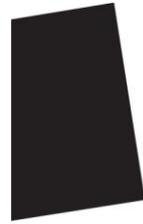
Bloomberg
SPACE

also comes to represent not only himself but a larger complex of ideas around belief and intolerance.

For these are fiercely sectarian people, but they are also, as Buchanan's clear-eyed portrait reminds us, *only* people beneath their colours – people who, however corrosive the factions to which they've pledged themselves, on some level did so because of accidents of birth, or economic conditions, or – mostly – because they were trying to make their lives meaningful. Accordingly, what Buchanan's photography so effectively performs, and unseats, is the mechanism of judgement. The first thing we know about the sitter, their *raison d'être* within the work, is that they're part of a group: so we assess them on the basis of our prejudices regarding the group. Yet then they stay there, gazing implacably out, asking for connection; and we come to recognize that none of us are wholly defined by our affiliations, while feeling the mournfulness of the degree to which we are.

But then photographic portraits are, almost invariably, a negotiation between the manner in which the sitter wants to be seen and that in which the photographer portrays them. That's codified to a great extent in Sarah Jones' photographs, which unfold in a space between control and ambiguity: Jones is a great choreographer of position, clothing, gesture, and ambience, but she orchestrates all of these aspects to create images whose meaning can barely be articulated. A woman may be sitting on a bed, her head half-turned, hair cascading down and her robe festooned with flowers. It feels like a caught moment, but isn't, and feels in any case like a moment *between* moments, a compound of moods that won't reduce itself to such massive abstractions as 'melancholy' or 'waiting' or 'lost'. Things intersect: the hair, of which there feels uneasily to be a little too much; and the deep painterly chroma of the wall behind; and the cloudy look on the sitter's face. These aspects meet at strange angles: the result is as much poetry as photography.

Accordingly, while we might see Jones' subjects as showing themselves in private situations, they appear to be both themselves and not: acting out, subtly performing the real. Jones' subjects here are life models – individuals fully used to stilling and sustaining their outward appearance for the benefit of another. At the same time, though, and they're placed in a situation both familiar and unfamiliar to them: in the drawing studio, but against a photographic backdrop, and sometimes clothed. Again, there's a shuttling between individual and group identity; the viewer must consider how far the model is individuated, both as a member of the group of life models and, in their profession, as the one nude person in a group of clothed sketchers. And, here as elsewhere in Jones' work, there is additionally a questioning of precisely what portraiture is, and where the psychological insight lies in it. For her, it's clearly not about catching someone off-guard, revealing themselves, but about observing the world and reconstructing it within the bounds of the photograph. It's a definition of exposure



Bloomberg
SPACE

that has little to do with accidents, though much to do with mystery and a space beyond language. The mediating force of the photographer, and in this case the benefits of meticulous control, are always apparent.

What's notable in *Within* is how these kinds of issues regarding the triangulated relationship between sitter, photographer and viewer vault over party lines. The photographers here are involved, within their practices, in fine art, photojournalism, and fashion photography – sometimes moving from one area to another, sometimes not. But this larger concern with what is knowable, what can be said, arches over all of what they do: what it means to photograph a person – and to stand, as a viewer, looking intently at someone we don't know and can only know in limited ways from photography, our assumptions flowing from our knowledge about the groups to which they belong. Yet for all the pitfalls and ambiguities, we keep photographing and we keep looking, broadly in the interests of empathy and curiosity and understanding. And if our more precise reasons for doing it – for centuries now – are not resolved here, they probably never will be. The point, for *Within*, is not to offer simple, soothing explanations or justifications; the point is to elucidate the abundant intricacies involved in one of the most universal of acts.

Martin Herbert



Bloomberg
SPACE