

# Un-Magazine Issue 3 January 2006

*The Ancestors*: the recent work of Eliza Hutchison

*The Ancestors* is about the dislocation of Hutchison's subjects – in place and in time. This is achieved through a process of extreme and unnatural physical displacement, and not through methods of digital manipulation. The waxy distended faces appear preserved, pickled perhaps – bits of hair sticking up like badly placed toupees. The eyes are buried in flesh, veins pop out and what could be a pained smile is distorted into smugness; the subjects seem full of themselves. For all this excess, the portraits are subtly rendered in black and white, with the customary curtain backdrop and film noir style costumes.

Hutchison's interest in death and preservation can be traced from earlier works like *Memphis Minx* (1999) that documents the mummification of a model using extreme armature. An excessive narcissism (death being an ultimate state) is represented by the preservation of the model through fashionable clothing and fixtures. Yet it is the revelation of the processes underlying the performance that grabs our attention and we are invited to contemplate the work's overall construction.

*The Entertainers* and *The Ancestors* are a distillation of these earlier themes. In this work, Hutchison explores the construction of the imagery solely through her subjects. Here we are confronted by the effect of a prop on a body. We do not see the prop in the portraits, but merely the uncanny effects on the subjects after they have been placed into this prop, and then relocated in space. This is examined by Hutchison through the lens of a large format camera and

recorded onto photographic plates, reminiscent of daguerreotype photography. Also evocative of this early photography is the stiff nature of Hutchinson's portraiture (in the early daguerreotype photography due to the long exposures sitters had to endure). In *The Ancestors* the theatricality is encapsulated in the forensic detail and through the performance undertaken in the production of each image. Once relocated in space, the staging of Hutchinson's sitters is further exaggerated, extending and relocating the boundaries of traditional portraiture. Ultimately, although the photographs are the product of careful, time-consuming staging, the experience of the sitter placed within the prop is fleeting and dangerous. Unlike early portraiture, the stakes are much higher and the effect more radical.

In its day early portraiture was experimental. Photography was a new science and the photographer very much the pioneer. The outcome was not always predictable. This sense of experimentation and uncertainty also exists in Hutchinson's portraits. Extreme conditions are imposed on the models and we witness the effects. The results reveal something about the physique and psyche of specific subjects. If, for instance, a subject is particularly thin, their veins may pop out more, they may feel more pressured, they be more at risk of passing out. Essentially, it is the unpredictability of the outcome that engages the spectator and, perhaps, drives the artist.

The portraits too focus our attention on the nature of emotional ambivalence. This is manifest in the artist's willingness to 'experiment' on humans, in the sitters' willingness to be 'experimented' upon, and in the viewers as compliant spectators of the 'experimental' product. It is also manifest literally in the portraits, which present contradictory emotions. The waxy distended skin reminds us of death, and yet popping veins and a bright-eyed greediness evokes life. This extreme state gives the subjects the appearance of fanatics, arousing our suspicions; we are unsure of their motives. The desperation of these Jim Thompson-like characters<sup>1</sup> is intensified through the staging of 'the portrait'; the urgency most palpable in the swollen flesh and strained expressions—they are bottled up and ready to pop.

In an essay discussing Piccinini's *Still Life with Stem Cells*, Linda Michael states, 'Historically a still life (or *natura morta*) was often an allegory on the transience of life or the inevitability of death. Is the destruction of life implied in this scene?'<sup>2</sup>. Michael is concerned with the tableau effect of the work and its self-containment. She suggests that the viewer is presented with suspended or frozen moments from which they are excluded, allowing for an impartial engagement

with the work. This notion of the still life and the implication for the spectator is explicit in Hutchison's work. It can be found in her first exhibition *The Still Life and the Cleaner*, an installation shown at 200 Gertrude Street from 1995. In this work Hutchison presents the stark white equipment of a cleaner – or a prostitute – her uniform, gloves, cleaning fluids and hotel room ephemera placed on a white forensic table in a kind of fetishistic tableau. Although the character is anonymous, the scene implies ritual and in turn spectacle, as the viewer is forced into an awareness of mortality.

The sense of suspended animation in *The Ancestors* is at once alluring and repellent. Although the subjects gaze directly at us, the constructed world they inhabit gives the illusion that they exist beyond us. The truth, all the same, is staring at us. We are uneasy in the knowledge that we too could be exposed...

This contradictory portrayal of motion in still life imagery is manifest in nineteenth century cadaver 'action' portraits. The most notable Australian images are of bushrangers, in which the dead hero poses with gun in hand, memorialised in-situ. The mourning portrait was also popular at this time, and was also considered to preserve the spirit of the dead. Again, the gravity of the portraits was due to the long exposures, which also produced a fitting ethereal quality. On a more literal level, the mechanical process of exposing the silver-coated copper plates to light generated a pseudo authenticity by 'capturing' an imprint of the deceased.

Hutchison's portraits achieve a different kind of preserved excess – a slippage in both time and human flesh. The theatricality is neither stiff nor artificial, but is uncanny and sensational. The moment resonates and our voyeuristic senses are stirred as we are offered a glimpse into extremity.

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## Notes

1. crime writer Jim Thompson created a cast of seedy, ambiguous, obsessive characters, see in particular Sheriff Nick Corey (*Pop. 1280*, Gold Medal, 1964), Deputy Sheriff Lou Ford (*The Killer Inside Me*, Lion Books, 1952), and femme fatale Fay Anderson (*After Dark My Sweet*, Popular Library, 1955).
2. from Linda Michael's essay 'We Are Family', in *We Are Family: Patricia Piccinini* exhibition catalogue, 50th International Biennale of Art, Venice, 2003, p.13.

*The Ancestors* was exhibited at TCB art inc. from 13 July to 6 August 2004. It was also shown at the Tokyo Metropolitan Museum of Photography in July 2004, along with Hutchison's last series *The Entertainers*, as a part of *Supernatural Artificial* curated by Natalie King.