

CAMERA (NOT SO) OBSCURA

by Jonno Rattman



Alone in a gallery but surrounded by photographs, we may not feel the solitude we expect. There is sometimes a sense of another's presence; we may even feel empathetic attachment. But how is it that we establish a connection with the portrait framed on the adjacent wall?

The portrait offers an opportunity for us to engage an image on a fundamental level, encouraging a dialogical relationship between spectator and sitter. Through the portrait we may posit insights into the subject's past; recognize their present, immobile temporality; and speculate about their

future. A recent series of portraits made by British photographer Richard Learoyd invokes each of these feelings at once while also extending an invitation for intimacy and introspection.

Learoyd's colossal camera obscura portraits – some as large as four-by-six feet – may appear to be a contemporary, color interpretation of the historical processes that rendered mammoth glass plates and lilliputian daguerreotypes, but they are more an attempt to reduce the intermediate steps that ultimately culminate in printmaking. His process fits into a long history of alternative practices, but it

is a modern relative of its nineteenth-century predecessors.

In recent decades, artists such as photorealist painter Chuck Close have applied a mixture of historical and modern techniques to create new, though distant feeling photographs. In 1999 Close began a series of short-exposure daguerreotypes using modern lighting. These beautiful, brutally honest portraits describe the facial landscapes of various artists including composer Philip Glass, photographer Cindy Sherman, and painter Elizabeth Peyton. Though the black and white silvery tones of the daguerreotypes describe contemporary subjects,

they cannot help but resonate with history. “What do you make into a daguerreotype to bring it back into 2010?” Learoyd asked in a March telephone interview.

Rather than attempting to use a historical process in a modern way, Learoyd modernizes the historical process to work with contemporary modes of production. His approach requires two rooms with a wall-mounted lens between them. In one room his subject is lit by a sophisticated Swiss lighting system, while the other is essentially the film-back of an enormous camera. Inside this camera, Learoyd makes an exposure onto a large sheet of direct-positive paper. The paper is then fed through a color-processing machine to produce the final print. Each photograph is unique: an edition of one. There is no negative; no enlargement; no reproduction.

Because there is no enlargement, there is no discernible grain – even under a magnifying glass. This gives Learoyd’s photographs a hyper-real quality, something akin to seeing high-definition television. But his images stand in contrast to what he termed the digital era’s “disposable image culture.” Seven or eight years ago he began experimenting with his process in an attempt to make “images with power and authority – not necessarily through scale, but through a sort of presence.” The images capture our attention; they loom over viewers both because of their size and because of the way they appear to live within our reality.

Composition is, in large part, dictated by a seven millimeter depth-of-field. Describing the process, Learoyd said, “You have to push and pull people; maneuver them into the right position so their hands are aligned

with their eye or their shoulders aren’t interfering with the focal plane.”

Once his subjects settle into place, they must maintain their position for an extended period of time while he prepares to make the photograph. As a result, Learoyd’s sitters show discernible outward and inward toil. “People project what they are because of their physical traits, but the aspects of their person come through in a different way,” said Learoyd. This emanating emotion, coupled with the incredible detail of the areas that fall into focus, allows the viewer to engage in a conceptual relationship that induces introspective thought, arousing our deepest memories and emotions.

The intimate connection between the viewer and Learoyd’s subjects is also the result of the laws of optical physics. “The pictures have no traits of a wide-angle image, except for the viewpoint,” said Learoyd. “There’s no barreling, there’s no stretching or distortion, but you do have the wide view of the person; so you look up their noses, and look down on their knees.” As a result, we sense an impossible, but physical proximity to the portraits. We are able to pay close attention to every detail of their being.

We see their scars; we see their wrinkles; we see the nuanced tonality of their skin. We may even count their eyelashes. As a result, we become enraptured with the personal history that we project into each of the photographs and that the photographs project into us. We are engrossed by the power of the portrait. It tricks us into accepting the paradoxical relationship between its existence as a physical, two-dimensional object and as an emotional catalyst. Learoyd describes this as “the severity of the photographic illusion.” It is precisely this illusion that allows us to form a

connection with the subject of the photograph, for a moment forgetting that it is just a photograph rather than a mirror that reflects the specters of inner thought. We look through the shiny surface of the image and realize the deeper, personal meaning of the portrait.

If we look at his portrait of Maeke, we are drawn into tormented eyes that communicate tense, liminal apprehension. The hues of her silky mauve blouse are echoed across blemished cheeks – their roughness contrasts the softness of the skin around her neck. Below, a hand at once tense with veins and tender with recline drifts into focus, cradling an arm that falls out of the frame. We may feel intimately close to her, as if we have known her for a long time, as if we can, just from her expression, know where her thoughts drift. Each of us experiences the worlds she inhabits with a different reaction, a different emotion, and a different memory.

The memories she evokes, no matter their course or origin, are the residue of our experience. Maeke speaks to each of us personally, subliminally, so that we question the connection between the real that is the residue of memory and the real of the actual photograph. The amalgamation of past and present, two-dimensional picture and real life, pushes us to find personal meaning in photographs.

“People see themselves in the context of this other person that they feel like they know,” said Learoyd. “I think that mirrors people’s everyday experiences of wanting to be close to people and then feeling alone. Maybe that is a reflection of their own version of their own mortality. Maybe those bigger questions are things that nag away at people.” ■