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the meandering flight of the albatross

Online Gallery Review - Ridin' Dirty Face



Mike Brodie is a Philadelphia-based photographer who exhibits his work both in real time and online. The latter is where I have seen his work, initially discovered in a particularly dull winter evening through my own love of Polaroid photography and interest in the peculiarities of the medium. Brodie's early work is in Polaroid, the film initially shoplifted, an act that enhances the

fleeting nature of instant photography and its "throw away" associations. Polaroid photography inevitably lends itself to hastily taken and bleached photographs, yet Brodie's Polaroids are carefully framed and composed. His photographs have a luminous clarity to them, colours rendered jewel-like. His conventional colour photographs have a similar quality, however appear less impressive in comparison to similar effects achieved with Polaroid and given the space for developing technique that conventional photography allows. Overall, the photographs are the work of someone with a natural eye for photography, still developing his abilities but with the potential to produce even more exciting work in the future.

It is Brodie's subject matter and his portrayal of that subject matter that it most interesting for me, given my academic history in Post-Colonialism in Art History. His subject is sometimes landscape, but for the most part portraiture. The people portrayed are generally those living on the margins of society – street kids, pigeon-men and women, and other people that Brodie encounters on train journeys throughout the

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States. Knowledge of Brodie's journeys and the fact that the majority of his photographs are taken on these journeys are key to understanding his photography, as they provide context and subtext to each photograph.

In an interview with Fecal Face, Brodie claims that he has a relationship with each of his subjects – to paraphrase, that he finds it difficult or is uneasy in photographing people that he does not know. This belies an uneasiness with the possibilities for power imbalance that portraiture photography of this type lends itself towards, where the photographer is working from a position of power and representing people who are voiceless in a wider society. Despite awareness of these issues, Brodie falls into the trap to a degree. The juxtaposition of the subject matter and the polished nature of the photographs make each subject seem as though in costume, or as though they were part of a photo spread for a fashion magazine. Furthermore, I would suggest that each photograph can be read like an anthropological study, with the subject situated in his or her environment in order to emphasise the “Otherness” of the subject, their removal from the conventional world of suburban houses and shopping malls. This power imbalance and subjectification of the individuals portrayed is emphasised by the angle from which the photograph is taken, with the photographer often standing above his subject and angling the camera down. This is not to say that Brodie is exploiting his subjects - I do not doubt that he has an empathetic relationship with these people. However, there is a sense in his photography that he is cataloguing quirkiness – whether for his own records of a time, place, a set of experiences, or for a wider consuming public it is unclear. Whatever the motivations for these photographs they remain tied to the individual who created them for their contextualization. This positions the photographs in a dangerous space – a place where when the images become separated from the text, experienced without the contextualization of the artist's personal history, and join a wider community of images that they will be misinterpreted, and this because of the histories of the photographic devices used in the work.

I would draw a parallel between Brodie's work and the work of Fiona Clark, portraying gay subculture in Auckland, New Zealand in the mid-1970s. Despite the empathy of the photographer and her involvement in the lives of her subjects, the photographs fulfilled a voyeuristic urge for the public with their portrayal of something with which the majority of

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New Zealanders had little or no contact. Widespread condemnation by the press in labeled the works as perverse because of the “Otherness” of those portrayed, despite Clark usually capturing her subjects in fairly prosaic suburban settings – familiar to an increasingly suburban culture. The comments of the New Zealand press of 1975 are mirrored in the press around Brodie’s work – he quotes his mother, who describes the photos as picturing “a lot of screwed up and angry people living a dark and depraved lifestyle”. * Clark’s images now act as documentary images to a degree and are nostalgic given their association with pre-AIDS gay culture. I would suggest that Brodie’s work is in a similar context, given his access to a subculture with which the majority of the public has very little involvement, the works acting to a somewhat voyeuristic capacity now and with the potential to act as fragments of nostalgia in the future for those involved in that particular subculture.

There is a sense in Brodie’s work that he is experiencing and documenting a unique and important moment in time, experiencing both an historic American rite of passage through his train journeys, but with a unique contextual setting given present day American politics, the general apathy that characterizes the American public at this time and the subcultures that have grown as a response to contemporary American life. His photographs reflect their time and place implicitly with their emphasis on details, situations and environments. Each photograph works as a clear and jewel-like record of the photographer’s experience and situation. However, for the wider public, these images fill a different need, and there is a danger in the way that the image is perceived when separated from the accompanying text. I cannot say any less than that aesthetically, I love these photographs and find the subject matter and the stories around each photograph fascinating. However, this fascination belies the uneasiness I feel when reflecting upon the position of power that the photographer finds himself in when portraying subject matter of this kind.

Select Bibliography

<http://fecalface.com>

<http://fionaclark.com>

<http://plrds.com>

<http://ridindirtyface.com>

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Thanks to Bex Galloway who pointed me in the direction of the Govett Brewster Art Gallery for information on Fiona Clark.

* The fact that Brodie chooses to frame his work in this kind of rhetoric is fascinating in itself and deserves a whole different essay – something about the way that artists frame their work on the internet when it serves as their primary place of exhibition.