

Critical review of *Uncovered*

An exhibition exploring body image by Daniel Regan and Agata Cardoso,

at Frameless Gallery 14 - 20 May 2012

Asymmetry and balance, 9 + 9

Uncovered is an exhibition of large-scale monochrome photographs of seven women, one man, and one boy with alopecia, by Daniel Regan, alongside nine women who have had breast cancer and evidence surgeries, by Agata Cardoso.

Nine as a product of 3 x 3 is an expression of perfection, the symbol of the virile power, in addition to being associated to the couple. Prior to their artistic coupling Regan and Cardoso were pursuing independent bodies of work in parallel, which conjoined towards this show after a serendipitous meeting, conversation, mutual recognition at a group.

Agata describes the posting of a project proposal bulletin via Breakthrough Breast Cancer (now MacMillan), followed by inundation of response, and a series of days photographing women, in conversation, explaining, making sure each was clear and happy with the project. The artist describes the work as 'having to be shown.'

Some have reacted negatively to the images. I come with a lay persons experience of the responsibility of taking serviceable record shots, while hearing the stories of people with vitiligo for a research department, and thoughts of two friends taken by breast and subsequent cancers, Catherine, barely thirty, nearly four years ago, and Ewa hardly forty, a month or so ago. I am comfortable here.

Frameless is a well-chosen intimate gallery over two floors, of white and wood with good spot lighting that doesn't bounce off the black and white images. The private view is a blend of apparently whole bodied, hairy viewers and celebrating subjects recognisable from the work and their non-hair status.

Put bluntly the hang alternates alopecia with cancer around each room, with a stutter to the pattern downstairs. What this creates is a subtly alternating effect of projection then recession, work by work, around the room, but the other way round to the obvious in terms of breast and hair loss.

The subjects of Regan's works come forward, filling their frame with front facing head portraits at double life size or so, pale skin looming from light, occasionally dark ground. They are flattened, but project. I am confronted with a series of faces with inherent symmetry of feature that is spooky in its perfection exacerbated by the format and surely the result of meticulous selection and edit of subject and shot.

A suggestion of porcelain doll, acute awareness of the quality of skin as surface, pale with freckle, pale with wrinkle, hyper awareness of features sitting on that surface; tattoos, accessories, drawn eyeliner, pasted brow, paired earrings. Face on head with no bodily presence, no location. A singular back view of a bald head shows an exquisite curl of tattoo. Its boldness offsets a solitary triumphant strand of hair.

Cardoso's subjects are imperfect people with heads and bodily presence, who inhabit, are composed within rooms, apparently their real rooms. The spaces, specific everyday rooms or dark backgrounds enclose the subject, naturally containing the person at mid ground within perspective at approachable distance. I like looking into other people's houses. I am drawn in.

I am physically pushed out by one series, drawn into another. How much I can go in, to psychologically engage with the subject is manipulated by the artist's use of gaze as a mechanism or visual construct.

The eyes in Regan's heads are studied as objects, aesthetic features, open or shut, but consistently shut to me sometimes by use of a beatific inner gaze that in its completeness leaves me outside, or a fixed stare that looks through and past me. Negated in this way I am given permission to study minutely every eyelash at my leisure. The essential person is rendered unreadable, absent. I am not asked to connect, just look.

Cardoso's eye gazes are individual to the subject; a regard of contained challenge, contemplative glance to one side channelled through spectacles. Momentary connection with the viewer through expression of the eyes which gives permission to observe and start to assume that I can offer back one side of a dialogue, empathise, interpret the story, the life.

This sense of interplay is developed by repetition of one portrait subject with a change in gaze and gesture between the two. She shifts from eyes hidden, exposing absent breasts, to hands covering breasts, smiling eyes. The artist binds us into two intimate moments of reveal as if trusted to be there in the making and taking.

Employment of personal and life accessories again, on the body, in the room, some dressing up for the photo, but harmoniously embedded here, woven in; earrings, a pearl necklace, tights dressing naked skin, carpet, curtain, a wig, a shawl. Elements inhabited, not on the surface, texture and contribution to the spectrum of monochrome. These are heard because the scars and trauma of changes undergone to the body are quiet.

The average age of these women is older than my losses to cancer. Perhaps time has settled things, the body softened and accepted. The lighting, photography and print quality give soft craters, undulations rather than livid bites of scars. There is a melting into shadow or a blending of person with the room.

Further than this, the artist uses, either intuitively or with surgical precision the lines and features of the room in synchronicity with the sitter, specifically the forms, asymmetry of the breast, the lack of breast or breasts. The curve of a bed head mimics the contour of the swell of an absent breast, the fall of a curtain follows the droop of a surviving breast, the angle of a curtain rail meets the angle of difference between a now mismatched pair, the arrangement of post it notes on a computer screen is fortuitous, or thought of.

Yes, Cardoso's women are exposing flesh and scars, depicted at home, each alone, and non participatory in life. However, the line of the eyes and the turn of the head, their posture attuned to lines connected within the space conjure wholeness and a right balance. Subjects which have had something taken away and could appear diminished and asymmetrical are balanced rather beautifully in their space and re-gain symmetry.

The photographic styles of the artists are different, but synchronise. Their formulae for capturing their subject differ, we alternate to and fro between the two, and two experiences of looking, being looked at, are denied connection, we connect. Life threatening cancer sits with life affecting alopecia, dark and light, light and dark. Positive and negative towards a sense of wholeness that brings me back to 9, to symmetry, coupling, to perfection, to art and beauty.

Ewa, an artist, with close clipped and one breast in recovery, pre reconstruction did not want looking to prompt the negative cancer tales of others. We didn't talk of Catherine. We did talk about her joy at waking in the night inspired with creativity, art not cancer. Uncovered is completeness, not lack and delivers this aspiration rather beautifully.

Catherine Linton
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