

Do only men have authentically visible selves?

A A JH

John Hurrell - 16 December, 2010

Most of these guys look sweaty, a few seem grimy or dirty and many are unshaven. They look startled but mostly not in any extreme sense. They are conventional looking (could be in most television advertisements - no nerds, no spectacles) and the photos all look dignified and becoming. No ugly or distorted faces here, no bloodshot eyes or snotty noses, blotchy skin, or unseemly growths. They are in a sense, glamorous. No one looks distressed though one does appear genuinely startled.

Bledisloe Walkway
Auckland Council Public Art Project

Jennifer Mason

Lightbox project: Experiment 14

19 November 2010 - 27 February 2011

Here is an unusual Auckland Council public art project, a suite of five lightboxes by Jennifer Mason in the walkway between Aotea Square and Wellesley St West. Her glowing coloured images consist of the close-up faces of five men (young to middle-aged) whom she photographed after they had been exercising strenuously, squirted in the face with water and surprised with blinding light. The idea is that their authentic 'true' unprepared selves be revealed in the resulting documented image.

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This is an obviously interesting exhibition, but in her accompanying written statement Mason says one odd thing, when speaking about the obvious absence of women in these images. She says that she didn't think any of the resulting photographs using women provided a satisfactory moment of 'authentic' facial expression.

How does one judge the 'authentic' appearance of women experiencing extreme bodily or emotional situations? Is such a 'real' facial



expression beyond their control - is it not the same as with men - or does such a state not exist? Does she mean women can never let go of a self conscious mindset, and are they (unlike men supposedly) always aware of being looked at? So they would always fake it anyhow. There can never be a 'natural' female **physiognomy** <<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Physiognomy>>?

Perhaps Mason is thinking about French feminist theory here, writers like Luce **Irigaray** <<http://www.iep.utm.edu/irigaray/>> or H  l  ne **Cixous** <http://www.engl.niu.edu/wac/cixous_intro.html>, philosophers who explore the qualities inherent within the lives of women's daily existence, their ontological being, or are all her female friends so vain they would never consider getting involved with this sort of project. They are frightened of looking unattractive.

Most of us probably think that the notion of impossible authenticity has no credence, that the value of pretence is not such an oppressively loaded gender issue that genuine female facial expression is impossible - so it is a big shame some women weren't used here. It distorts the project when the resulting images look like a study of masculinity, especially after the project started off being about humanness.

The idea of Council supported lightboxes in this dark little alleyway is an admirable one so let's hope it continues. The deadline for submissions for the programme in the second half of next year is the end of February.

John Hurrell

Andrew Paul Wood, 10:04 a.m. 16 December, 2010

Isn't this rehashing territory already rather well tilled by Sam Taylor-Wood's "Crying Men"?

John Hurrell, 10:50 a.m. 16 December, 2010

Ah Andrew, I have considered this. I happened to bump into a photographer friend while I was looking at these, so I picked her brains and she said the very same thing.

Actually I don't think it is true. The Taylor-Wood project is about male actors exercising their craft but this is about lack of bodily control - the opposite. It's not intended to be about masculinity but the human subject. That is why I scrutinised her explanation of having no women because that fact really weakens the project, distorts its interpretative possibilities.

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