

Rachel Kent Opening Speech for Peta Clancy 3rd December, 2009



Paper thin evokes a range of meanings for me – delicate, textural, light, semi-transparent. It is also the title that Peta Clancy has chosen for her solo exhibition here at Dominik Mersch Gallery, which considers the surface properties of paper – in this case, photographic paper – and the surface or skin of our bodies.

Peta Clancy is a Melbourne-based artist who works with photography in an 'expanded field'. In past works she has punctured her photographic surfaces with thin silver pins, creating a delicate lace-like effect across images of facial features including lips, eyelids, and brows. In her current works, facial portraits are crumpled over and over until layers of photographic paper and emulsion begin to separate, and the surface layer with its ghostly facial image is ironed and re-photographed; or alternately embedded directly in wax, preserved like a keepsake or *memento mori*.

Roses are interspersed amidst these faces, their symbolism both timeless and pointed – roses grow, bloom, wither and die, in parallel with the lives that are documented. The petals of the roses also echo human skin with their plumpness in bloom, and their withered, shrunken quality in death.

There is an intimate quality to Peta's photographs with their scrupulous mapping of facial features: downturned eyes, furrowed brows, curving lips, and defiant chins. The purposefully modest scale of the images also gives them an intimacy not found in large gloss prints, for example, and echoes the scale of the human face itself.

The subjects of these photographs are members of the artist's family as well as students she teaches at an Indigenous studies program in Melbourne. Of Indigenous heritage herself, Peta combines an interest in portraiture, history and race. Young and old are also featured here, with the marks of time – lines, wrinkles, furrows – accentuated by the robust physical process of making, crumpling, and re-making the photograph itself.

In the accompanying artist's book – an artwork in its own right – the art historian Geoffrey Batchen is quoted as suggesting that photography sits 'between vision and touch'. I think of the immediacy of family photographs, as they are thumbed through and viewed over and over; and of the work of the hands which direct the camera, then develop the prints, selecting and cropping, framing and displaying them for us to look at. Peta has spoken of her interest in the materiality of photography – again, we might think of the physicality of crumpling up prints, flattening them out, dipping them in wax.

These works consider the relationship between hand and eye, body and representation. Sensual and imperfect – a far cry from the perfection we have grown accustomed to through media imagery – these faces map the passage of time and experience, and are rendered timeless through the act of photography.

Rachel Kent, Senior Curator, Museum of Contemporary Art. 3rd December 2009 – for the opening of Peta Clancy's exhibition, Dominik Mersch Gallery, Sydney