

The Honest Mirror

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photographs, auxiliary, auxiliary ego, mirroring

Photographs, even documentary ones, are ambiguous records. I am drawn to many types of photographs, ones that are tricksters as well as ones that are faithful. In my own practice as a photographer I am interested in making portrait photographs that mirror social encounters, photographs that connect the viewer to a depth of expression in human relationships.

In April, 2019 I was in a marvellous, run-down theatre in Auckland making a series of photographs of psychodrama that I hoped would bring the method of psychodrama to life in a realistic way. This is the story of how that series came about. It is a telling of my love for photography and my love for psychodrama and the parallel I see between the photograph and the psychodramatic concept of the mirror.

It's Sunday, early April. The days are getting shorter; the shadows are stretching out. In the Crystal Palace Theatre in Mt Eden it's cavernous and dark. I have brought in studio lights and they are arranged on the stage, creating a pool of light in which the psychodramas take place. Tattered curtains hang at the sides of the stage and a screen rises at the back. On the stage are some of my fellow psychodrama trainees and a few of their friends. My trainer is directing these psychodramas.

The photographs that I make will be exhibited as part of the Auckland Festival of Photography in June 2019. I have written consent from all the participants to exhibit the photographs after they have sighted the digital images and approved them. But how can any of us comprehend what that future experience of seeing those images will be like? How will it feel to observe one's own vulnerable moment, stilled, made monumental, exhibited? My camera is an impartial observer, reflecting back these living moments without judgment, but there can be a felt vulnerability in the experience of being mirrored. What will the future audience of these images see when they look at them? I already know that I will print these photographs over a metre wide. They will be life-like. The camera that I'm using will record such detail that when the pictures are printed the pores of the skin will be replicated, the creases of the clothing and the tiny light reflecting from a button will be faithfully documented. The figures will be

at such a scale that the viewer will feel that they are transported here, to this moment, to this place, the subject lit by the studio lights, the background receding into darkness in the vast theatre.

A drama has begun. Two women stand on the stage. They are both auxiliaries in the drama. The protagonist is not in the image. I am photographing from just behind him so that I see what he sees. One woman faces the camera, the other faces away. When I look more closely I notice the hands of the woman facing me. They are tense. Her thumb and forefinger pinched together as if she's just holding on. She's holding on to a chair with her other hand. Her face is full of expression. I see clarity; a degree of resentment; a gathering of resolve. There is something happening here. I'm impartial and at the same time curious and compassionate towards the subject. The studio light creates a glow on the back of her hair. I notice the balance of this composition. It pleases me.

I look through the viewfinder. I focus on the face of the auxiliary, on her eyes. I set a small aperture, which together with the studio flash, ensures a wide depth of field so all these features can be seen. I trust my ability to produce a photograph that is correctly exposed so that the scene comes to life in the way that I see it.

I know that I have something. I feel a quiet excitement as my camera connects with this living moment.

When I first participated in psychodrama in 2017 I was transfixed by moments in the dramas. I saw them as living artworks and I knew that I wanted to photograph them one day. When I was awarded the annual photographic commission by the Auckland Festival of Photography Trust in February 2019 I immediately started to plan towards photographing a psychodrama workshop.

What is it that I'm trying to represent in these photographs of psychodrama? The honesty that photographic portraits can convey is not easy to pin down in words.

I used to believe that a photograph could express the character of a person but through my study and exploration of photography I have come to believe that this aim cannot be fulfilled. The photograph is not fixed. It expands beyond the limitations of the frame, full of potential. Not everyone will have the eyes to see what a photograph points to but some will. Some will have their eyes and hearts open when they look.

It's June 2019. Four photographs of the psychodramas are being exhibited as part of the Festival of Photography in a disused silo in the Wynyard Quarter in central Auckland. It's an unusual, evocative space with concrete walls.

I'm with my sister, Kathleen. She has just arrived from Australia. I have brought her to see the newly installed work this morning, before the evening opening event.



ROLE REVERSAL, 7/4/2019 12:27



AUXILIARY ROLE, 7/4/2019 4:10

The photographs are framed with narrow black frames and at first my sister thinks that the works are moving images on HD Television screens. They are lit from above but they seem to glow from within. There is a forward sense of movement in the photograph of two women standing adjacent to each other. One faces the audience, the other is turned away.

I'm drawn to the woman facing us. Her body is like a coiled spring. Something is happening in her. She is about to spring to life. This is what I see in the photograph. This is what my sister sees when she says to me "I thought it was a video. I was waiting for her to move."

The photograph doesn't hold anything back. It challenges the viewer to look further into the image, beyond the surface. It is open and patient. Over time the mirror of the photograph reveals even more if we spend time with it, just as the experience of a psychodrama can unfold and reverberate further after the event.

As I write this now in June 2020 I look at another photograph from the psychodramas at the Crystal Palace. It's the photograph that I'm most drawn to from my series of images. One woman comforts another woman who huddles in a chair like a vulnerable child. There is a great tenderness in this scene. I, too, felt tender as I stood on the stage quite close to this protagonist and auxiliary and photographed them.

It comforts me to look at this image, to really take it in. Something tugs at the edge of my consciousness. A memory of a photograph that could not be taken. The memory is from 2014. My sister Anne has just died. Her eldest son is standing in the room at the hospice in the early hours of the morning, being comforted by his young, anxious partner. She's pregnant with their first child, the grandchild that my sister knew she would never meet. It's a moment of grief and beauty and I know that I cannot photograph this moment. Yet I want to photograph this moment. My camera is in the room but it's not possible for me to disturb that grief or try to memorialize it in that way.

My mind is like a camera which takes a photograph that will never be printed. No-one else will see this image of a shadowed room in which Anne's children mourn the loss of their mother, who was also a second mother to me. She was fifteen when my twin sister and I were born. Her patience and her ability to comfort others were cherished by our family and by all she came into contact with in her profession as a nurse. Later on that morning in April 2014 I do photograph the empty room. I capture the autumn light filtering through the curtain, the empty chairs, and the soft folds and creases of a sheet laying on the bed. The photograph has a capacity to mirror even the unseen. I welcome this last trace of her spirit.

The photograph of the tender comforter in the psychodrama at the Crystal Palace Theatre evokes a rich store of feelings in me. I see many layers of my life in one image. I see my fellow psychodrama trainees



ENACTMENT, 7/4/2019 3:39



WARM-UP, 28/4/2019 2:54

participating in a profound drama, fully involved with each other. I see my nephew being comforted by his partner. I see my sister comforting her babies. I feel the comfort that my sister gave to me when she was just a teenager.

Photographs hold more than what is first seen. They are mirrors to our lives if we warm up to them. What I see in a photograph is not what the person next to me sees in that same photograph. They see something of themselves. Like a psychodrama — a photograph may become an honest mirror, returning us to our bodies so that we can see and feel our lives more deeply if only we look closely.



Yvonne Shaw is an Auckland-based artist, and Lecturer in Photography at Unitec, Auckland. In 2019 she commenced training with the Auckland Training Centre for Psychodrama. She is currently investigating the ways in which photography and psychodrama intersect, particularly with regard to doubling, mirroring and the category of the moment.