

Bill Henson: Three Decades of Photography

The Australian photographer Bill Henson described one significant aspect of his work in a 1986 exhibition catalogue that has been republished in the catalogue *Mnemosyne*. 'In any sequence no photograph can be extraneous – the entire series should in fact amount to one 'image' which has been articulated into a complex of images. For this reason I take some trouble over the installation of a work – everything having its place yet the possibilities remaining inexhaustible.' The permutations of images, words and ideas, and their migrations from exhibitions to catalogues to art criticism is an appropriate introduction to a discussion of the exhibition and catalogue. The title is resonant for art historians, as Mnemosyne (- memory) was the title given by the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century art historian Aby Warburg to his research into cultural memory, represented most famously by his extraordinary image archive housed in the Warburg Institute in London. Is there a connection between Henson and Warburg?

The installation of Henson's work at the National Gallery of Victoria relates to the concept of an image archive, through the exploration of the inter-relationships between the representations of people, and their psychological and inhabited space. Henson's body of work is very much a work in process, in that meanings are not fixed in time or space and rely upon their various configurations and installation contexts. The seemingly familiar resides in Henson's images, however he circumvents these assumptions by the unexpected combinations of people and places. Henson questions "how might one animate this fragile, breathing closeness or presence in a photograph whilst, at the same time, allowing little possibility for a merely familiar connection to the individuals who appear in the picture?" Henson's images and groupings of images present a virtual archive of visual and cultural memory, retaining an ambiguity where the in-between-spaces become the focus of attention.

I think this may be relevant to Warburg's idea of cultural memory. Speaking in 1926 of his study of Rembrandt's portrayal of Medea (a Dutch artist interpreting a Greek myth), Warburg expressed his desire to, 'overcome a purely formalistic approach to aesthetics and to prepare the way for a theory of the dynamics of human expression. This will have to be based on philological and historical investigations of the links between the creation of images in art and the dynamics of life as it is actually lived or presented on the stage.' Warburg's hope of finding a more dynamic interpretation of the relationship between art and life, one that would make clear the psychic life of images, is perhaps analogous to Henson's project to animate his images by emphasising the (changing) relationships between them. The photographs in Henson's catalogue have been exhibited, published, re-exhibited and republished, accompanied by texts that describe the fugitive meanings created in the temporary

relationships formed between them. Henson's *Mnemosyne* is a record of art criticism as well as his art, containing two introductions, twelve commentaries and a transcript of an interview with the artist, dating from 1975 to the present.

The evocation of memory is an important aspect of Henson's work. In the series *Untitled 1983/1984* the fragmented and reconstructed images of children, museum interiors and exteriors evoke numerous associations, that have a disquieting emotional immediacy. This is made apparent by the vulnerability and alienation of the subjects contrasted with the assured opulence of the public realms. The exploration of photographic techniques and allusions to other artistic processes is evident throughout the thirty years of work in the exhibition. *Untitled 1977*, a series of black and white photographs of a male nude, is an exploration of the body and chiaroscuro akin to the practice of life drawing. His work of the mid 1990s refers to the painting traditions of other epochs. In fact it seems appropriate to use the term palette to describe the intensity of his colour and shadows, which sometimes lingers forebodingly or like an intoxicating humidity. Walking through the exhibition was akin to walking through a labyrinth of Old Master galleries, the resonating silence of the images heightening this experience. Indeed the considered installation of Henson's photographs not only allowed for viewing each discrete series, but it highlighted the continuity and the thematic inter-relatedness of his artistic practice. However the nightscapes in Room 4 were not given the space that the size of the works demands, making it difficult to view the works properly. These images present a different type of internal spatial relationship between place and people and seem to be fixed in a specific historical moment, a state that most of the other works in the exhibition are able to transcend.

The translation of Henson's work to book form cannot have been an easy one given the nature of his practice. The spatial experience of seeing the works in a gallery context, which Eszter alludes to, naturally cannot be translated to a book. So there is a kind of deadening of the images in the catalogue, one that may not have been avoidable. There is consolation in the high-quality production values of the catalogue. The images are saturated but not overly glossy, enhancing their oil-painting-like appearance. Henson's famous *Untitled 1992-1993* series looks like a series of neglected paintings by Correggio and Annibale Caracci, maladroitly restored. The polygonal image on page 413 (untitled and unnumbered) shows a reclining male nude in a twilight landscape that would not have been out of place on the ceiling of a sixteenth-century palazzo in Ferrara. Slashed and misaligned, the disjointed pieces of the image perhaps express the slippages that have occurred in the translation of European Old Master visual tropes to a contemporary photographic context. *Mnemosyne*, like many artists' monographs, arranges the artist's oeuvre in chronological order, interspersed with critical texts contemporary with the works' original exhibitions. It is certainly an impressive document of Henson's practice and his critical reception.

Bill Henson: Three Decades of Photography reveals an articulate and consistent body of work. The highly-staged photographs examine the subtleties of the relationships between Henson's protagonists. Importantly the exhibition reveals the

Hugh Hudson & Eszter Szabo, Bill Henson: Three Decades of Photography

working process of the artist. Henson makes this explicit. In Room 7 of the exhibition *Uncompleted Series 1976-2005* demonstrates that a series is not necessarily finished, but a work in process, even over a twenty or thirty year period. Perhaps this reveals some of the dialogue within and between Henson's series of works over the course of his career. Henson overcomes the 'merely familiar' by displacing the viewer's assumptions, by posing questions, and animating the in-between-spaces of encounter.