



OBJECTS IN MIRROR MAY BE CLOSER THAN THEY APPEAR

ANNE ZAHALKA IN CONVERSATION WITH CURATOR KARRA REES

From the self-conscious stage-setting of her earlier works to the later images presented in a more documentary vein, the idea that appearances can be deceptive has been central to Zahalka's practice. Often conflating reality with fiction, she has appropriated or re-staged iconic images and simulated period styles as part of an ongoing enquiry into the nature of image-making, and the representation of the world in which we live. Breaking down myths and cleverly subverting stereotypes, Zahalka addresses issues of national and personal identity, gender and representation, examining the fabric of Australian and European culture through the lens of art history.

KARRA REES: Anne, you state in your Masters of Fine Art thesis: "No category in pictorial art is as conservative as portraiture. It is subject to a number of strict conditions for a portrait is not just a likeness of an individual to be preserved for posterity; it is also an image of pride, a projection of a social position."¹ Do you see your portraits as homage, or perhaps a continuation or reaction to traditional portraiture?

ANNE ZAHALKA: I didn't initially set out to pay homage to the 'Old Masters' but rather wanted to understand their influence and the nature of their incumbent value system. Portraiture is deeply embedded in our cultural and social life but we pay little attention to the role it plays in contemporary representations. My engagement with portraiture is concerned with these aspects and is both a reaction to the strictures of traditional portraiture as well as an engagement with its structures and conventions. Portraiture is conservative because it is governed by a set of codes and conditions established through its long history. I like to work within these established codes and find new ways of portraying my subjects.

Painting and painters appear to be the strongest influence on your work, so what drew you to photography?

The direct transcription of what lies before the lens onto the photographic surface recording a place, person or object is what interests me. It is the detail and the clarity with which the photograph conveys its subject and its immediacy and directness that I like. The idea of being able to look at something closely in order to interpret and understand, is why the early seventeenth-century northern European painters painted their objects and scenes so precisely. They appeared real to the eye and could be studied and shown as evidence of their knowledge and wealth. It is what the photograph reveals as evidence of the world that I find so compelling.

Your series *Resemblance* adopts conventions of seventeenth-century painting, and seems to invite the viewer to spot the references. What is the currency of appropriation today?

It's difficult to avoid some sort of reference or quotation as all kinds of media inform what an artist does. I continue to have an

(opposite) *The Photographer (self portrait)* 1989
type C photograph 50.0 x 50.0 cm

interest in re-working historical and contemporary images because it enables a dialogue and understanding between them. The initial tenets of Postmodernism were that everything had already been done so one could only continue to speak through the images and texts of the past. This is probably still true yet there are always subtle shifts or ellipses that can provide new meanings.

Historically, portraits immortalised sitters in their finest clothing and jewels, surrounded by worldly possessions indicating their wealth and status. In a similar way, the domestic scenes in *Open House* classify the subjects, defining them by their décor, clothing and possessions. Are the objects and interiors more revealing than the sitters?

In some ways I see the subject as just another object in the room – I know this sounds appalling! While I am concerned with the subjects and what they project through their setting and their performance, I am equally interested in the stuff that surrounds them and what this says about them. Ensnared with their 'worldly possessions' they speak about their passions, their wealth (or lack of) and their place in the world. These portraits of my friends have been immortalised in the neon glow of the illuminated light box (in which they were originally cast), at a particular time in history (eg. *Saturday, 2:48 pm* 1995), in a particular domestic place and now in the public space of the art gallery. How much more revealing can this be?

The disjunction between subject and surroundings is explored in your series *Welcome to Sydney*. Immigrants to Australia stand tall and look out from large format light-boxes at Sydney's international airport. Each figure is photographed with an object carried from their homeland, and they seem to both belong in this environment and are alien to it. Why did you choose to represent them in this way?

I wanted to suggest ideas of both displacement and belonging through this series of portraits. I chose locations that were known and popular, such as postcard views of Sydney, and others that were unfamiliar. All of the selected locations had some relationship to the subject representing areas where they lived, worked or were connected to. They appear both rooted to, but isolated from

their surroundings, like a new species being planted but not yet becoming part of the native landscape. I hoped that the audience would respond to the people as individuals who have different ethnic backgrounds. To the fact that each brings with them cultural and symbolic belongings that are part of who they are. These portraits should be seen as positive affirmations of the complex and diverse nationalities settling here. I hope it portrays them with dignity and respect.

The original *Artists* portraits were taken in the late 80s with a view to continuing the series, with the most recent work having been made this year. Have you approached the new portraits in the same way?

The recent portraits are less concerned with playing out the artist stereotypes. They still perform self-consciously, as artists on location, in their own domestic space or against the backdrop of their workplace. I became more interested in setting them in the environments they work and think in and yet having them still reminiscent of their artwork, so that they looked a little like one of the characters of their own making. The earlier artist portraits were situated in, or against, a representation of their own signature-style of work that had been elaborately constructed in a studio. They played out the various roles of the artist as hero, revolutionary, alchemist, inventor, magician, gambler or game-player which connected them in some way to their practice. Later I became more interested in working with artists who use photography/video or film to also make portraits and see how they might behave when the camera is turned on them. I especially like the collaborative aspect of working with artists and what they bring to the process. It gives me greater insight into their practice.

In *Bondi: Playground of the Pacific*, you restaged two iconic Australian images; Max Dupain's *Sunbaker* (1937) and Charles Meere's *Australian beach pattern* (1940). Did you anticipate your images would, in turn, become iconic images?

I had no idea how significant these works were to become and that they would appear on the covers of books, catalogues and anthologies, or as posters and postcards, and be studied by art students; now even my daughter is studying *The Bathers* in her primary school text book, *Australian Readers Discovering Democracy!*

I made *The Sunbather #2* and *The Bathers* during a six-month residency at the Bondi Pavilion, and exhibited them at the end of the residency in the gallery there to a very broad audience. Sandra Byron, then curator at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, walked into the gallery on the last day of the show and acquired five works from the series for the exhibition *Twenty Contemporary Australian Photographers from the Hallmark Cards Australian Photographic Collection*. Once they were out in the public domain they were swept along with the whole multicultural tide. The photographs were made at a time when we were questioning the dominant images of the nation and I wanted to rewrite these to reflect a more culturally diverse and balanced idea of its community.

Continuing your meditation on the dynamics of stereotypes in Australian culture, your new series, *Scenes from the Shire* photographed at Cronulla, follows on from *Bondi: Playground of the Pacific*. The subjects however, are set against the sand and surf, not a painted imitation. What has inspired this return to the Australian beach and how has your approach changed?

I wanted to revisit the beach following the aftermath of the Cronulla riots and see what signs of racism might exist there. Like most people I was horrified when racial violence erupted there a year ago on such a mythologised site of our nation, the beach. I realised the beach has always been a contested site for different ethnic and social groups – it's just that one seems to have more claim on it than another. Having been given some background reading to the history of Cronulla and the riots written by my friend Julie Rose,² and an introduction to Aheda Zanetti – an Australian Muslim dynamo who recently launched the burqini, a new design of modest swimwear for Muslim women – I felt equipped to return. I also knew of a documentary film being made following the recruiting of Lebanese men and women into the lifesaving club. It seemed like there was change adrift on the beachfront.

Having moved away from the staged studio tableau work of the late 80s and working in a more documentary style since my *Fortresses and Frontiers* series through to *Leisureland*, I became more interested in using the location as a kind of ready-made set to place my figures in or against, thereby contextualising them in a real place. While the portrait still appears staged there is the

obvious participation of the subject. I think this gives these portraits an interesting tension between being part of the scene and yet performing in it.

In most of your series you have made a self portrait, however these portraits have rarely been included when you exhibited the series. Do you see the self portraits as a part of each body of work or something personal that sits alongside the series?

The self portraits I have made are sometimes personal and sometimes belong to a body of work. I have never seen them as being an important part of my practice but have made them when the opportunity has arisen. I can spend long periods preparing for one self portrait while others are quick – like snap shots. Some are more like a documentation of the set-up I have been working on,

The Artist (self portrait), Berlin 1987 cibachrome photograph 80.0 x 80.0 cm





Home 3, Anne and Alice Zahalka (version 2, from the series How Jewish is your Home?) 1998 type C photograph 50.0 x 60.5 cm

while others tie into a series. When I have exhibited my self portraits alongside other 'sitters' in a series I subject myself to the same examination as them. In the case of the *Collector #8 (postcards)* it seemed important to put my own obsession on display and subject myself to the same sort of scrutiny. It suggested not only our joint interest in the nature of collecting but revealed more about me as the artist. In a series such as *How Jewish is Your Home?* I wanted to subject myself to the same question and invite the viewer into my home revealing myself as both subject and maker of these portraits. But appearances can be deceptive and while I might appear in the context in which I live, I am merely a reflection, framed repeatedly by the architecture within the image.

I think the appeal of your images resides partly in a clever fusing of humour with a critical eye. Is irony and wit an aperture for audience engagement?

I think humour is a really useful entry point to my work – it allows viewers to respond more immediately, identifying with the subjects or seeing oneself reflected. It can make audiences more aware of their own complicity in the reading of the images and invites them to question their responses.

You highlight the camera's ability to distort the truth and blur the boundary between reality and fiction. What do we really learn about a person from a portrait?

The making and taking of portraits is such a contrivance. There is nothing natural about the process, yet the aim is for it to appear so and for the subject to appear natural and unselfconscious. Few people are comfortable with the camera (except those who are trained for it) and we often want to be told what to do. I give very little direction to my sitters – I prefer to let them find their own way of sitting. Increasingly I am more interested in the unease expressed in the pose. It is confronting to see oneself in a bad light so to speak and even more confronting when we know this is how we may appear to others (even if we don't see ourselves this way). The photograph is evidence and in this case it doesn't lie. But a photographic portrait is also only one moment in the course of a sitting and many expressions pass across the face during this time. So while we might want to read into the person presented before us in the photograph, through their face and eyes – the so-called 'window to the soul' – there is no real way of knowing. Everything else in the picture however is a clue.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Anne Zahalka, *The Language of Gesture Towards a Lexicon*, (Sydney: The Author, 1994), p. 10.
- 2 Julie Rose, 'Sur la Plage: Again, and Again', *Log*, 7, Winter/Spring, (New York: Anyone Corporation, 2006), p. 100.