

## *Multiples and the Art of Self-portraiture*

By Cara Hine

Director of The Photography Room and one of the seven artists represented in this show *Multiples*, Sean Davey, wrote of Billy Maynard's work that 'All photography by nature is self-portraiture'. This idea can be pursued in relation to *Multiples*, in the notion that these works reveal something of the artist themselves. But if photography by nature is a form of self-portraiture, the primary function of the camera to seize a single frozen moment is at odds with what is characteristically human, where history and memory are a collection of multiples, the numerous fragments that make up our lives. The idea of all photography as self-portraiture is supported by *Multiples*, where the works have a welcomed complexity. The form that many of the works in this exhibition take is like a photomontage or photographic contact sheet. While this allows visitors in the space to ingest a magnitude of work, it also gives an insight behind the photographs themselves, and into the minds eye of the artist playing with frames. The works are incredibly revealing in this way, because on display is a development of the artists' ideas, or rather the collection of unique aesthetic compulsions. The works in *Multiples* mirrors the complex self and in many ways the works challenge and expand on what is so innate to the photographic medium.

*No More Tears* by Amy Mills deals with this notion of history and memory; something made from multiple moments in time. Her work documents an overwhelming aspect of her own life. Amy has Cystic Fibrosis and developed diabetes as a result of medical complications. 'I took 10 photographs every day for 30 days. I wanted each photo to be different even though the routine is continual and will be for the rest of my life. The rest of my life, that's a strong statement and one I have always been afraid of.'<sup>1</sup> *No More Tears* is a compelling collection of personal moments throughout the 30-day period. This photographic timeline is confronting. It communicates the daily repetition of treatments and the gruelling, ongoing ordeal of her condition. These works are self-portraits, yet the extent to which Amy has photographed herself over the 30 days has created a portrait of the artist that extends beyond the images themselves. What is fascinating is the ways she has manipulated what is so inherent to the medium – capturing singular moments in time – to show how a personal reality is built on multiples. This ongoing production of photographs over the 30-day time period shows a truer, more revealing portrait of the artist, which is incredibly bold. It is particularly brave, the ways in which Amy has used photography to deal with the ongoing certainties of her condition.

There is delight in singling out individual photographs, particularly in Billy Maynard's work *Untitled (contact sheet)* from the series *Trans/Tender 2010*, where on close observation, surprising compositions jump out from the array of small pictures from the contact sheet. As soon as we marvel at one photograph it suddenly sinks back into the montage of photographic contemplations, where the picture functions again to demonstrate the pleasure of viewing multiple collected moments at the same time. Equally, Therese Harrison's study of the landscape at a barramundi farm in Queensland, delivers surprising compositions and points of interest that may be singled out and admired. Yet the grouping of multiple pictures in this work compliments an embodied vision of place and truly captures the movement through both time and space. Again the camera is being reworked from its basic function to represent single moments in time as the work tempts to cross over and into the realm of cinema. The assemblage of multiple pictures here results in the creation of one picture that moves. Daniel Wallace does a similar thing with his series *The Last Stand*, and through his multiple photographs the viewer is able to track the artist's progression through the landscape. As the audience of these works, we do not experience so much as the place and subject matter, but the artists' journey. This brings quite an engaging, personal element to the work, which further highlights the ways that all photography by nature is self-portraiture.

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<sup>1</sup> Amy Mills, Artist Statement for 'No More Tears' at Huw Davies Gallery, August 2011

*Multiples* has a distinctive sway towards documentary-style photography, and Sean Davey says that it's this kind of shooting that most 'sustains' him.<sup>2</sup> Sean's own work in the show evokes something that is deeply familiar. They are exceptionally temporal works and what comes across in his photographs is an intense engagement between the artist and his subjects; both people and place. In *Eden, September 26 2006*, there is a strange interplay between modes of photography. As if the significance of 'frame' is being highlighted. A beauty of Davey's works is that they simultaneously hint towards a kind of narrative whilst also concealing truths. They are descriptive and beautiful in their simplicity and yet they stand for the everyday, the ordinary or routine. Perhaps this is the essential ingredient to documentary-style photography.

Robert Agostino's hand printed photographs of nudes and flowers are brilliantly tender works, and a vast departure from the more documentary focused work by Davey and Mills. The nude – particularly the female nude – and the still life, need no introduction in relation to the history of art, yet in the context of *Multiples*, Robert's work presents a charming commentary on the possibilities of photography. In connection to *Multiples*, these 12 prints assist in showing the varied approaches to photography, revealing much about the position of the artist in connection to both subject matter and the photographic medium.

All photography as intrinsically a form of self-portraiture is an interesting concept to consider when viewing Dennis Mortimer's piece – a last minute addition to the *Multiples* exhibition. Mortimer presents a vivid series of pictures, an alarming array of colour that tracks the human body, specifically the female form, in various positions. There is a fascinating relationship happening in this work between three different parties. The exceptional colour he has used attracts one almost immediately, and yet on closer investigation viewers find a reflected image of themselves in the mirror set behind the myriad of photographs. Drawn entirely away from this notion of photography's ability to seize a single moment, the viewer is instead fiercely repositioned in the current moment, of engaging with the work in front of them. The argument is always made that photography can transport the viewer to a different time and place, yet Mortimer's piece somehow stops this process and allows a space where the work can simply be enjoyed for its sincere beauty. His piece is esteemed less in terms of its contextual properties, and more for its simple presence as an object of art.

*Multiples* brings together a collection of very raw and honest works that reveal something of the artists themselves, in the sense that all photography is by nature self-portraiture. A number of the works in this exhibition address the complexities of a single frozen picture to encompass a mood or a journey; photographs, in some regard, representing fragments of a selective memory. And interestingly a number of these artists have chosen to connect the individual photographed moments, presenting them all together as whole works. This lends the photographic works to what is intrinsically the basis of memory, as made up of multiples.

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<sup>2</sup> Sean Davey, in 'A Room of One's Own', published in BMA (extended interview), 31 Jan, 2012