

'When I Lived in Modern Times': Archive, artefact, album.

Exhibition dates: 16 Sep – 12 Nov 2005

Preview: Thursday 15 Sep 6:00 – 8:00pm

Louise Hepworth

"A shift in address is necessary for an "aesthetics of resistance" to be made relevant to an amnesiac society dominated by culture industries... archival objects serve as found arks of lost moments in which the here-and now of the work functions as a possible portal between an unfinished past and a reopened future."

Hal Foster, 'An Archival Impulse'

Louise Hepworth's ongoing project 'The Black and White Years' draws upon a personal archive of several thousand photographs shot over a four-year period. Unusually, these four years are not the immediately preceding ones but are from a decade earlier. Hepworth's photographic practice, like that of Craggier Orefield, makes use of a body of images which retrospectively re-surface, and acquire their intended meaning only through the passage of time.

Rather than simply reflecting the artist's earlier concerns, her editing and printing of 'The Black and White Years' recasts her images into a meditation upon "how many experiences became my story." As she remarks, "the production and presentation of the works from documentary images highlights their subjectivity." The phrase 'The Black and White Years' refers to the period in which the artist learnt to handle a camera, when she shot solely on monochrome film stock. Naturally, this decision was for practical as much as aesthetic reasons, though she notes that when growing up we metaphorically see the world in terms of contrasts – "things appeared in black and white". Hepworth argues that for many photographers, a monochrome documentary mode still connotes authenticity and truth telling. By appearing to work within this mode but undermining its assumptions, she "weaves a complex picture of multiple truths".

The artist's undertaking – in effect, a fictionalising, or curating of her earlier self – offers her the opportunity to re-frame her personal and professional journey. 'The Black and White Years' are, when taken as a whole, a commentary about the building of an identity – one built in large part through an immersion in the world of images. Almost all of Hepworth's pictures were taken ad hoc, and have the grainy, high-

contrast aesthetic characteristic of early photojournalism. The effect is that we feel to be thrust into a world of drama, heightened urgency and ideological differences. However, the artist's subjects encompass both the figurative with the architectural, and her approach is flexible enough to allow for both the journalistic and the highly personal.

Having carried a camera almost continuously and shot thousands of rolls of film, the artist is able to use her own archive as a form of 'source material' to be plundered, reworked, re-edited and juxtaposed. Hepworth describes her process – and the crux of the project as a whole – as a form of "narrative construction" undertaken in relation to her personal biography. The conceptual underpinning of the project is akin to literary fiction – and what has been described as 'meta-fiction'. Indeed, the most productive way in which we might view 'The Black and White Years' is as a kind of novelistic enterprise. Like most novelists, Hepworth draws primarily upon her own experiences for inspiration, but imaginatively transforms them into "motifs and recurring themes" shaped into a coherent whole. Rather than simply being a 'roman-a-clef' though, her approach is to confuse the borders between author, narrator, and character. A huge number of authors from Martin Amis and Jonathan Coe to Jonathan Safran Foer have created characters and narrators with their own names and we might see 'The Black and White Years' in a similar light. Of course, using photography – an indexical medium – might be seen as a perverse enterprise for such purposes. It is precisely this tension between the artist's imaginative use of her archive, and its documentary aesthetic, which bears unexpected results. Hepworth's strength is to deploy photography's ability to record and document in order to interrogate the relationship between personal memory and images. 'The Black and White Years' offer complication rather than revelation.

Hepworth's approach might also be described as novelistic or literary in a number of other ways. The tactic of linking her images into a single gigantic contact strip makes the frames feel like chapters in a book or a film storyboard. Realised as an installation in a gallery, 'The Black and White Years' is also cinematic in its treatment. The artist's use of a contact strip format unites dissonant subjects by means of montage. A 'real' contact strip, we assume, would be unlikely to jump between times and places. Accordingly we swing between suspending disbelief and the artist's fiction being opaque. The artist's use of text and graphic symbols as recurring motifs also places her work within a 20th century photography tradition linking the Surrealists to the Situationists. Graffiti is seen as both a form of protest and as an art form.

In one of the illustrations here – the artist’s father caught unawares, asleep and curled into a foetal position – we are given privileged intimacy into the family home. Our point-of-view is unsettling, even threatening, though. The approach is intentionally dissonant to the subject matter – the lens looms over the man who is recumbent and powerless. In another frame, by contrast, the artist shows us a form of public address, albeit one mobilised by the disenfranchised or the disaffected. Being shunted between different sub-stories and social groups, we shuttle between intensely personal vignettes and wider political histories. Or more accurately, we are forced to see personal experience through the political, and vice versa. Hepworth recognises the inseparability of what are ordinarily viewed as separate domains. She describes one of her strengths as “taking things from different communities; bringing different stories together.” Other images in ‘The Black and White Years’ include moments of turbulence from European history and hedonistic nights. Next to which are changes in popular culture and consumption and days spent in protest. Alongside are captured the final days of the old printing presses of the Morning Star, Britain’s only socialist newspaper inbetween dilapidated buildings in the North-East which the last decade gentrified into submission. If Hepworth’s concerns are, on one level, those idealistic ones which mark the transition into adulthood and the necessary search for an identity, they are on another, both the way we construct ourselves through images, and the way we can make an impact on the world as an individual.