

Assignment 2: Museum Portraits

The genre I am working in for my OCA Advanced course is 'Portraits in Series'. These notes accompany the first series of photographs submitted to my tutor and present my objectives and working method. The photographs are a series of candid portraits taken in London's museums, captured with the aim of observing this aspect of contemporary social life.

There are many antecedents to this type of work. In the late 1930s Walker Evans made candid portraits of people on the New York subway. He later said that the Subway portraits were "[his] idea of what a portrait ought to be: anonymous and documentary and a straightforward picture of mankind." (Walker Evans). Evans's work combines a clear, factual gaze with empathy for his subject matter.

In the 1950s Harry Callaghan produced a series of candid portraits of women walking out on the streets. These photographs are tight headshots taken with a telephoto lens. By shooting this way Callaghan found "...that people were lost in thought and this is what I wanted..." (Harry Callaghan).

In more recent times, Philip-Lorca DiCorcia produced two series photographing his subjects on the streets of major cities, 'Streetwork' and 'Heads'. DiCorcia used hidden flashguns to light his subjects, which give his images a curious cinematic feel. (Philip-Lorca DiCorcia).

Other photographers have also produced work in museums. Elliot Erwitt published a witty book, 'Museum Watching' (Erwitt, E.). Thomas Struth produced three series of more conceptual work, 'Museum Photographs 1 and 2' and 'Audiences'. When commenting on latter, Struth said that he had "sometimes wished [he] could be the painting looking at the faces of the audience" (Struth, T.).

I wanted the photographs to be:

Empathetic - not to poke fun at my subjects,

Anonymous - to represent 'types' rather than individuals,

Candid - the subjects to show no awareness of me, the photographer,

In context - to reveal that they were taken in a museum,

Largely of adults - to avoid photographing children in an identifiable way, because of the social taboos surrounding this.

On a technical level, I used a small 35mm rangefinder camera so that I blended in with the other tourists. I did not hide, but equally I did not engage with the subjects. Because of the low light levels I used either fast film or digital at high ISO settings. I did not use flash because it is not allowed (without prior permission) and because I did not want to draw attention to myself. I chose to shoot the series in black and white to eliminate distracting background colours that might divert attention from the subjects, and because I felt it works better with the inherent graininess of the photographs (resulting from my choice of film speed).

References

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Philip-Lorca DiCorcia, "Exposed: Surveillance, Voyeurism, Surveillance and the Camera", Exhibition, Tate Modern, Available from:

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Erwitt, E. (1999), 'Museum Watching', London: Phaidon Press

Struth, T. (2010), 'THOMAS STRUTH Photographs 1978-2010', Munich: Schirmer/Mosel Publishing