

Photographic portraits offer hard look

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Almost since its inception, portraiture has been the obsession of photography. It might be argued that the primary role of photography has been to document conclusively at final frontier, the human face.

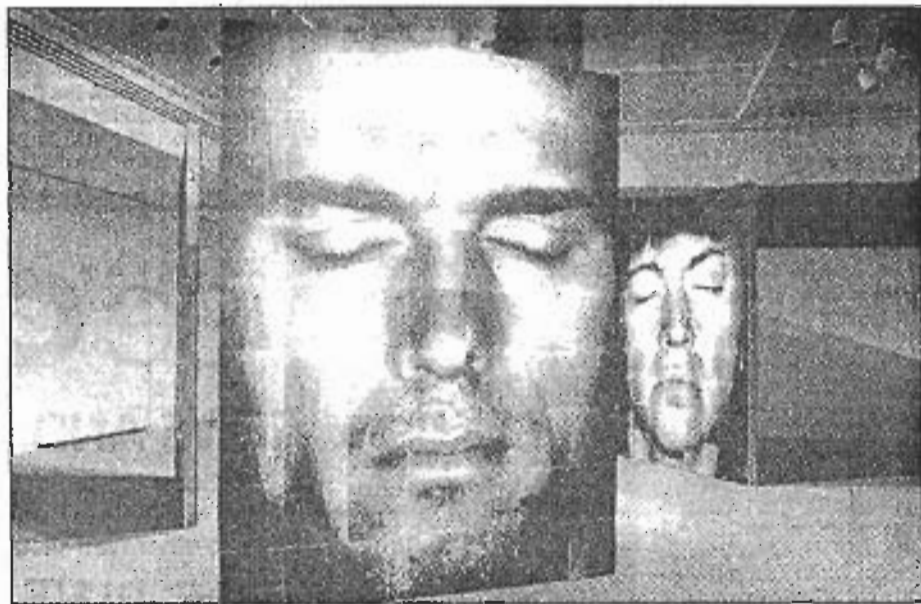
Now, Montrealer Roberto Pellegrinuzzi's giant photographic portraits, on view at Galerie du l'Université du Québec à Montréal, question the very meaning of portraiture.

Titled *Les Écorchés* this show, curated by Louise Déry, director of the gallery, consists of six panels. Architectural in scale, each of these has, on one side, the vast, looming image, in all shades of gray, of a human face. The people, each of whom appears in two panels, are closely cropped, with flesh taking up the whole space. With fields of skin punctuated by assorted orifices, the people become nearly indistinguishable, a thickset of gray stubble here, a crooked wrinkle there serving as the most obvious differences.

That the eyes are shut, as in death masks, increases the sense of anonymity for the subjects, now to us only as Lucie, Pierre and Claire.

Each giant panel is in fact pieced together from 10 photographic sections. Pellegrinuzzi photographed his subjects bit by bit.

The term *Écorché* in the show's title refers to something flayed, skinned or otherwise abraded, but in fact what the sitters experienced might



Images from Roberto Pellegrinuzzi's series *Les Écorchés*.

have been more a kind of trial by heat from the repeated flash of the camera as it moved methodically along.

But these tissue samples, which can be viewed independently from the whole, are as much the paper upon which photographs are printed as

anything faintly biological. The mental process of deconstructing Pellegrinuzzi's portraits is facilitated by the fact that the portrait sections are not perfectly aligned. Pellegrinuzzi's approach wasn't completely scientific. Scanning a panel, we become aware of the thin gaps between the sections and the odd shift in an eyebrow. Such "flaws" are the locus for a measure of subjectivity, if not mere chance, that the artist was unable or unwilling to banish.

The notion of face as integral object and, for that matter, of a photograph as record of a single moment, is challenged by Pellegrinuzzi. These works are more profound than Pellegrinuzzi's earlier leaf photos in that now time plays an essential role. There is the time it takes to walk around these huge images, and the period of time, or times, in which the photos were shot, momentarily scorching the faces with light. In fact, the closed eyes may be mainly in response to this brief torture.

In a manner somewhat akin to that of painter Chuck Close, with his systematically produced faces, Pellegrinuzzi attacks portraiture, and, in the process, photography.

✦ **Roberto Pellegrinuzzi, *Les Écorchés*, which is part of the *Mois de la Photo*, remains on view at the Galerie de l'Université du Québec à Montréal, Room J-R 120, 1400 Berri St., till Oct. 9. Information: (514) 987-6150.**

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