



Mask Maker

Photography's aim to record reality permeates the work of Roberto Pellegrinuzzi. The artist is known for withdrawing photography from its habitual site—the wall—in order to create theatrical simulacra. In the nineteen-eighties, he built full-scale photographic facsimiles of domestic objects where the shapes were entirely covered with their photographic doubles. The late Montreal art historian René Payant wrote about his collages, saying that, in them, photography was vanishing into a new rebuilt form. Yet in his recent exhibition at the Galerie de l'Université du Québec à Montréal, Pellegrinuzzi made a set of oversized portraits, where the exact opposite seemed to occur.

Entitled *Les Écorchés*, the artist sets forth, frame by frame, a crude cartography of three faces. Presented in what seems a meticulous topological puzzle, the faces were photographed in a systematic, almost scientific approach. The models were immobilized for one hour while the camera scanned their faces. In the gallery, each image—the result of sixty-three shots blown up to monumental proportions—reveals every detail of the skin. Visitors are confronted with faces more than three meters in height that are surrounded by a labyrinth of floating walls on which the fragmented portraits are displayed.

The photographs are set in pairs. They confront the viewer with different portraits of the same model, emphasizing a sense of passing time and of perpetually changing appearance. But most importantly, the images open a breach between identification (we see the same person twice) and resemblance (the medium changes their appearance). One cannot help but feel that in the process, nothing seems to find its proper place.

In a spectacular way, the work activates a sweeping gaze. The camera scrutinizes, so does the gaze. Despite the profusion

of details, the portraits unroot the exactitude of photography. In a strange shift, even though mapping should make the face more recognizable, ruptures are established, disjoining the images from reality. Through excessive care in reproducing the real, coupled with an extraordinary saturation of the visual, Pellegrinuzzi conveys the idea of a dissolution of the image. Consequently, the work summons a sense of touch, with not only the numerous scars of the images, but the distortions of the face.

The portraits are decorticated according to the grid. The electronic flash molds the skin, unfolds the volumes. Moreover, "There occurs an effect of collapse not unlike the deformation of the earth rendered in maps, for the background planes on either side of the face are brought back to the foreground," writes Louise Déry in the catalogue. Aesthetic models of beauty are put aside. The faces are turned into masks (their closed eyes confirm this feeling). The work deals with a principle of construction where ruin reveals at the same time that it causes dissolution.

This is precisely the point where photography affirms its own presence, attending in Pellegrinuzzi's work to the breach between identification and resemblance. Here, photography fails to imitate what one thinks of as real. Photography reproduces the faces, reconstructs them, and while showing its own mediation, in a way erases them. Identification can no longer rely on resemblance. Identity is losing face. ■

by BERNARD LAMARCHE

Roberto Pellegrinuzzi
Les Écorchés 1999 Black and white photographs,
 wood, cardboard, pins 3.3 x 2.5 m each panel
 Photo Richard-Max Tremblay © Galerie de l'UQAM