

## The Failed Realist

The nexus explored through Morrissey's work combines the conventions of portraiture, revealing that which is normally hidden, and 'everyday anxieties'. In the 1990s, Morrissey's *Women with Moustaches* series (Source 22) explored the anxieties surrounding facial hair, and the challenges they pose to the conventions and ideals of femininity. In 2005, *Seven Years* took the family photo album and family relations as subject matter, elaborately restaging real and imagined snaps to probe the construction of childhood and family.

In the series of photographs presented here, *The Failed Realist*, the proposed object of enquiry is (once again) situated within family life but what is met through these photographs of face-paintings is not entirely straightforward. The photographs were made in collaboration with the artist's daughter, when she was between the ages of four and five years. Morrissey writes:

"Face painting is a rainy day activity that we both enjoy. Once her motor skills evolved sufficiently well for her to control a paintbrush, she wanted to paint me rather than be painted. Instead of the usual motifs of butterfly, or flower, she would decide to paint something from her immediate experience - a movie she had just watched, a social event, a rite of passage, a vivid dream."

The painted faces recorded in the photographs are, thus, the traces of a vivid and fanciful play of imagination making sense of life's narratives – real, fictional and imagined. Emerging through play, what was being depicted was entirely present in the moment it was being told and painted. That the abstract markings are not (for the child) deliberate, if clumsy, variations on the masks of Pierrot or Harlequin is suggested by the title of the series. As failed realists, children intend their drawings to represent something from life without yet being able to control the depiction nor yet having fully thought through the relationship between parts.

Even if we acknowledge that Morrissey's face was animated during the moment of painting (rather than resolutely neutral and ambivalent), the mood and ideas expressed across the photographs can be unsettling. Childhood is a complex negotiation rather than an idyll, and the particular age charted through these photographs is one where there is a peak in the occurrence of nightmares and irrational fears. In *Penny* the grim genie-like face with the swirling black marks is possibly less scary at rest than in motion, and both *Party Girl* with outsize-black tears and *Lady Bird* with the red, black and purple face with the single black tear, seem likely to be tragic even with a smile.

So far, the suggestion is that what is met through the photographs has to do with childhood. And yet, we do not meet the child and this is not quite an encounter with her world. The photograph is of the mother. We are removed from the moment and the scenography of play. Disparate events are rendered temporally equivalent, in that incidental markers of the particular day have been removed – no clothing is evident, hairstyle is largely unchanging, and the backdrop is constant. The expression is neutral,

as far as is possible, and 'confrontational' as it expects to meet your gaze. We are, thus, returned to the figure of 'the clown', serving not only to amuse but also as critic, the teller of truths that are difficult to acknowledge. The artist confronts us as a clown but, denuded as she is, the object of critique is withheld.

One might surmise that the photographs propose a renegotiating of 'remembering' not unlike that effected through Morrissey's earlier reconstruction of scenes of childhood by adults. The photographs record ambivalence toward the iconic moments of childhood. But, removed as they are from the scene of play, that ambivalence is not necessarily toward the construction of childhood. The works do not particularly propose themselves as portraits of motherhood, and yet, it is the mother in the photograph. The darker moments in the drawing through paint evoke the tricky notions of permission and transgression that her young child struggles to make sense of. It may be that the ambivalence evoked through the photo-graphie speaks to the tricky negotiation and role shifting of arriving into motherhood.

There is the struggle to re-construct yourself as a 'good enough mother', without losing sight of what else it has meant to be yourself. *The Failed Realist* might, at times, describe something of the struggle to be resigned to things no longer being quite as they were in one's world of work and wider social contexts. Or it might echo with an artist I know who didn't quite feel like 'a mother; until her child was around eight years old. Looking at the photographs through this lens is to study the constancies behind the mask, the steady gaze, the line of the mouth, the subtle changes in colour and texture of the tied back hair. Where the face is most easily seen, occluded by relatively few streaks of grey and white paint, 'the artist' seems most likely to be visible. But the expression remains unyielding, if faintly wry.

Morrissey's object of enquiry is wilfully elusive, the perspectives and experiences enfolded within her compositions do not coalesce. The works call up the body but refuse access to the specific, embodied experience and sense-making of mother or child. They both acknowledge and resist the child's authority – in wresting agency within the face painting game and in the meanings to be made.

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