

Trish Morrissey, *Seven Years*
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On a grey and overcast summers day an amateur photographer takes a picture of a young girl in her swimming costume on a pebbled beach. Clumsily the hand of the photographer partly obscures the lens and the central figure seems uncomfortable, perhaps she is shy about her body, and taking the photograph has made her feel exposed. We wonder who is taking the shot and whom it depicts, let alone why it is on display. The only information supplied is the title August 8th 1982.

Brought together with January 25th 1979 and September 4th 1972 these works appear to be a selected group of photographs from a family archive. Certainly there is a resemblance between the two main characters that appear in most of the works. These form part of a new series by Trish Morrissey entitled Seven Years. In fact it is Morrissey and her elder sister who appear, and the title refers to the age gap between them. The photographs are mainly set in and around their parents house in Dublin, Ireland. Rarely do the sisters play themselves, but instead they appear in different guises and settings, across a decade. The gender of the characters changes as the young girl on the beach becomes a man with short hair and a moustache sat with his legs apart on a sofa. The androgyny of the characters is used to prevent the usual mimetic representation of family portraits that rely upon identifiable roles and positions. We cannot be sure who is the father, mother, daughter or brother. In this way despite the thread of autobiographical reference woven through the series there is a continual blurring of fact and fiction. It becomes clear that this series is less about one particular family but more an examination of the generic nature of family portraits and how they are interpreted.

The production of this new body of work marks a considerable departure for Morrissey and relates much more to film. In each frame the artist has set herself the task to recreate a particular mise en scène and there has been meticulous attention to detail to ensure that no evidence of contemporary reality seeps in. Constructing these shots around her family home rather than in the more sterile environs of a studio lends the works an authenticity that is crucial. However this has also made the realisation of the photographs more challenging and demanding. The hairstyles, make-up, clothes, furniture and cars are important but are not the subject of the work. This is not about masquerade, but it is about camouflage, as it is only through accurately mimicking real family portraits that this project can deconstruct that vernacular.

There has been much analysis on how family photographs are ideological tools used to naturalise a standard family unit in order to disguise its stereotyped and coded characteristics. As Liz Wells discusses in her text on Image and Identity:
".. personal photography, relate to individual experience and may operate, like dreams, to condense or to displace, in effect offering a stand-in for actual experience. Photography,

more generally, in selective reproduction of images of people, places and events, operates forcefully, in ideological terms, within specific cultural formations. " [1]
This seems to be the area in which Morrissey's new work operates, she seeks to deconstruct family photographs by using various devices to render the familiar uncanny.

In many ways Morrissey's work relates to the final series of work by the American photographer Ralph Eugene Meatyard made in the early seventies called The Family Album of Lucybelle Crater. This series comprises of 64 black and white photographs and has been left by Meatyard, an artist who rarely discussed his work, as an enigmatic epitaph for future generations. In the photographs two characters always appear wearing the same dime-store hags masks. One is the artists wife Madelyn and the other character changes, in some Meatyard appears and in others it is his friends, neighbours or his children. Using a semi-translucent mask these people are simultaneously revealed and concealed. In many ways this relates to how Morrissey and her sister appear in Seven years in different guises. Meatyard, as Morrissey, acts as director and authorial presence setting and controlling the scene.

For Meatyard the power of photography was its role as a document that needed to be read, he once commented that photography bore a close relationship to poetry and stated: "... works are pictures. Each word in a poem has pictures associated with it . . . I would like to get people to be able to read, as if in words, a picture. They would read 'stone,' 'tree,' and so forth and so on, and through construction of the picture be able to be made to be led to see these things exactly as if it were written out on a page. " [2]
Likewise Morrissey encourages us to read her photographs. August 8th 1982 is every family photograph that makes us cringe. It is the picture we did not want taken and that we most want to lose behind the sofa, but that appears at the most inopportune moments. If it is a poem its subject is adolescence and it perfectly epitomises the uncomfortable emergence of nascent sexuality.

[1] Liz Wells the Photography reader introduction to Image and identity Routledge 2003 p377

[2] Ralph Eugene Meatyard taken from James Rhem book Ralph Eugene Meatyard The family album of Lucybelle Crater and other figurative photographs, Distributed Art Publishers, 2002 p40

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Trish Morrissey