

## **Trish Morrissey - Camilla Brown, *Portfolio*, Issue No.49, 2010**

Morrissey's style could be described as narrative documentary as it uses the conventions of portraiture and snap-shot photography whilst collapsing the distinction between fact and fiction. The artist always appears in her work, although at times she is hard to recognize, which mines the territory of the family photograph. In her previous series Seven Years she worked with her own family using her parents Irish home as a location. Setting scenes in the 1970s and 80s required meticulous attention to detail that seemed more of a nod to film production and due to the strong performative element. Central to the work is role play as Morrissey changes her persona in each shot, in one work being a teenage girl in another a young man. However despite having a connection to moving image work, her practice is very rooted in the tradition and language of photography – particularly vernacular photographs. The real triumph of Seven Years is that the final work seems to have fallen out of a family photograph album.

There is no less performance involved in this new series of work by Morrissey called Front. The series has a total of twelve images showing a variety of different groups of people. Five of the series are shown here all of which are set on beaches around the UK and taken over the summer months. In the work Morrissey explores both the coastal landscape and the British fascination with the seaside. This new work required her to develop a very different way of working as she photographs groups of people she does not know. We assume most are family groups and Morrissey sets up the shot with them and on the last minute takes the place of one of the women, after whom the work is titled.

It is important to note the collaboration at the heart of these photographs that become an exchange of roles between Morrissey and the woman she replaces. The women are asked to become the photographer / artist whilst Morrissey becomes them. Morrissey

explains her work and aims with them from the outset and it is an ongoing dialogue so the participants will be made aware of how their image is used in shows and reproduction. In exchange for their help they are given a family portrait taken by Morrissey. As complicit participants the authorship of the work becomes shared.

There are parallels between Morrissey's work and that of the Korean born artist Nikki S Lee whose work has also been about taking shots of herself with different groups of people. In Lee's series Projects (1997 -2001) she infiltrates a range of different groups including Skateboarders; exotic dancers; tourists and punks. Lee disguises herself changing her hair, make-up and wardrobe and even her skin colour. Much as with Morrissey, it is only apparent that Lee is in each shot when the work is brought together as a series. The charade is carried out for that one final image – often taken by someone else. It is critical that other people who appear in the shots - again like Morrissey's Front - play their parts so that the artist seems to sit naturally with them without standing out. However a notable difference is that with Lee we do not know if those around her are in on the act. The satirical edge then becomes somewhat uncomfortable as we are unsure if we are laughing at or with the participants she chooses to photograph. However what makes her practice more interesting is that it deals with wider issues about her being an immigrant and the lengths she will go to in order to fit in. It also speaks of ethnic diversity and how we typecast people.

Although Morrissey's work touches on issues of race the tension sits with her fascination with the family unit. We assume the groups are families and it is only when we see Morrissey in each shot that this presumption starts to unravel. Although these people are strangers to us, all of us will have similar photographs of our own families that are like this. The work touches on how family photographs operate in the vernacular context, and how they are also used to propagate the hegemony and stability

of the nuclear family unit.

But there is another edge to Morrissey's work as this is part of a long and ongoing series of self-portraits of the artist, and so it continues with an autobiographical strand. Morrissey began this series when she was newly pregnant with her first child. Given that she will always appear in her work the physical, let alone emotional and psychological transformation she was going to go through would inevitably effect her art practice at that time. Morrissey's work has in different ways considered the tension between how we see ourselves and how we are seen, and are in some ways labeled, by others. The process of being pregnant and becoming a mother significantly alters how a woman is perceived. Pregnant women discuss feeling as though their body is no longer their own, due to both the physical effects of carrying a child and also because of the way as their physical appearance changes others attitudes to them alters.

There is a phenomenon I was thinking about in connection to this work, and some of these ideas, called The Imposter Syndrome. It is a syndrome supposedly more prevalent amongst women and particularly affects those who would be considered highly successful in their careers, but motherhood can induce it in others. Sufferers feel as though they are frauds and have the constant anxiety that they will be caught out. Pregnancy and motherhood can for many women bring on anxieties in terms of how they will cope and how others will judge them. It is one of those rites of passage in life for which one can never be fully prepared and it can be very fraught terrain that each new mother has to negotiate. Morrissey does not chose to show herself pregnant but she does in this series of work act out the role of being a mother in other people's

families. Morrissey talks about motherhood in terms of role-play. Temporarily these families play host to her - the imposter within their midst.

Trish Morrissey