Blow up the Inside World: An exhibition of self portraits by Brisbane Artist David M. Thomas

Artist’s Statement

The self-portraits I began making in 1993 have been a way of addressing figuration, self-representation and ontology. They also often demonstrate my disaffection for an integrated institutionalism that seeks to control individual experience and leads to the co-option of this experience by a society of spectacle.

With this in mind, I have, for over twelve years, made works that approach the idea of the individual and its disintegration, through text, paint, audio, video and my own body. I have had many ideas and tried numerous different ways of making a work that may or may not appear as a representation of myself. Indeed, this particular show could eventually look like a group show about the idea of self-portraiture. Through this exhibition I hope to document a serious and yet playful approach to portraying myself, and that the works trigger thought and discussion about art and its making.

In Blow up the Inside World, I am only beginning to understand my motives for making many of these works. It is correct to say that no one makes a self-portrait because they think it will make them rich. The most commonly held belief is the inner experience of the subject is being mapped or documented in the work. Personally, I believe this is often not the case. For me, self-portraits, the ones I like anyway, always have a ghostly quality. My alternate title for this exhibition was ‘ghosts don’t know no better’ that points to a thematic of spirit like indifference. This detachment has both an attractive and a sinister quality in that the realm of the ghost is politically disconnected and ambivalent. Ghosts are above the law. The rules of this world don’t apply to them. They don’t vote. They do not live with the burden of daily life or its joys. No one sees or hears them, and yet, they get to see everything that happens.

David M. Thomas 2006

David M. Thomas Interview with Stephen Zagala January 2006

S: What’s the show called?
D: The Show’s called “Blow up the inside world”
S: And what is that a reference to?
D: It’s a reference to a song; by Sound Garden I think. The actual title of the song is ‘Blow up the outside world’, which I used in a work called ‘Dumb Bombs’ that was a list of song titles. For this show I’ve changed it to ‘Blow up the Inside world’.
S: What does that mean?
D: It’s something about the mythology of self-portraiture. Conventionally, self-portraits are supposed to represent something of the internal experience of the subject. I guess this is because when someone is painting themselves the assumption is that they have a privileged insight into what’s going on inside their head. I don’t know if that is necessarily true, but it is certainly something to think about, and something that people think about when they look at self-portraits.
S: So are you saying that your approach to self-portraiture has more to do with emptying the subject and blowing up interiority?
D: I try to be quite transparent about my approach; transparent but inventive about trying different methods of portraiture I guess. And assuming a contrary position in relation to conventions is part of that, but I’m not just emptying out internal experiences. That’s quite a heavy technical or theoretical area, to do with the way one experiences the world. I have done a lot of other works which sort of document, in a phenomenological way, my everyday life. That’s where the project began; with me photographing myself every day, once a day, in the same place. Changing the backgrounds every now and then. That was like emptying out my identity in a way, or becoming transparent because I was thinking about the kind of clothes that I wore and the way I presented myself to the world. I was trying to understand myself through other people’s eyes, rather than through some inner knowledge of myself. The audience for that work was just myself. The one or two times I showed that work it was a huge failure, it really discouraged me from showing them again.
S: So why was it a failure
D: Well I think I had a number of experiences where I presented the photographs in a grid, or as individual works or something, and I don’t think it was received the way I would have liked it to be received. It was always received as pure documentation or something that is not intended. Lets just say I wasn’t happy with the way the works were presented. So I stopped trying to show the photographs in an exhibition context and started thinking of them in terms of a promotional thing, so that’s where the advertising I used for Art +Text came into it. As singular things in a magazine they were much more interesting and seemed to work in a much more ambiguous way.
S: In many ways it sounds like you were documenting what was going on around you, rather than documenting your self as such.
D: yeah, yeah I think that there’s a lot of that.
S: Even if you were documenting what you were wearing on the day, as you’ve said, it is a documentation of the way people would have seen you.
D: Yeah, and for some weird reason, I don’t exactly know why, people would give me clothing, T-shirts and stuff, which I would wear in the photographs.
S: So you just became this kind of mannequin?
D: I was very much like a mannequin, yes, (laughs) which is an idea again for this show. I was going to get a bunch of mannequins, that look like me, and dress them in my clothing, my worn out clothing from that period which I still own a lot of, and other things that were given to me to wear. I was somebody in a role, like this mannequin is in this role. I was dressed in this clothing and playing a role, and I guess largely that’s what those photographs actually document.

S: Because there is a real blankness in your approach to portraiture that perhaps the mannequin metaphor brings out. Your self-portraits are not really meditations on some intense interior world. It’s almost like you are a screen that reflects whatever else may be going on around you.
D: All I can say is that I agree with that…

S: But at the same time, I don’t mean to make you sound like Andy Warhol. In his self-portraiture, the face also becomes a disaffected screen, but your work seems to have a different energy.
D: No I think my work is more scrappy. I’m not presenting a unified front. I think that Andy Warhol attempted to become a kind of industry, an industrial entity on a world stage and I have no desire for that.

S: But just in terms of his formal approach to portraiture, I could say a lot of things I just said about your work: That it’s about a screen and there is a kind of emptiness to it. But with Andy, it’s always still about faces. With your work it seems to be more about your head or your body occupying space. It’s not about the visage of magazine portraiture, as much being about your ontological or phenomenological presence.
D: I think that there is something superficial about just dealing with the mask, the face, and stuff like that. I am trying to deal with something that I guess is more sculptural. Funny enough, the thing I like the most about painting is its sculptural qualities. And the thing I love about performance art is its ability to get to some intensity of human experience. That’s what drew me to the idea of ontology - this study of your being in the world in relation to the world that you’re in. That’s quite an intense thing. I have tried to draw these quite different activities together into one practice. It’s quite difficult, but it’s what keeps me interested. So I just take the things that I like about specific formats, and try to blend them into different types of work.

S: Because your work does vary quite a lot doesn’t it?
D: Yeah
S: We have talked about those early photographic works, but then, as I understand it, you lost your camera at one point…
D: It was stolen from a car, outside a friend’s house in Newtown. I didn’t have enough money to replace the camera so I had to think of another way of continuing the project, which, up until that point, had been defined quite strictly around a photographic practice. That put me in a position of crisis. I had to make a decision and I realised that it wasn’t about photography, the media. It was about ontology and the idea of that. So I could shift back to other skills that I had that. That was, I think, the teaching that I got, that you can re-learn old skills that you may have lost, but you can also learn new skills when you need to. And apply them to whatever your project might be doing at the time. Everything at that time was very ‘project’ driven.

S: So how did you solve this problem of documenting your life everyday without a camera?
D: I made very quick paintings - I guess you would call them symbolic - that represented myself in different states. The idea was that they would be like automatic drawings, where I couldn’t take the brush off the page to create the image. This was the limitation that I placed on myself. So it was executed in one move. Like the camera, you press the button once and that’s the image. But the immediacy of this approach might also suggest a kind of truth in presence. I wouldn’t want to make too much of that, but some of these works were quite frank and funny, and I felt very honest in a way. The thing that really interested me about this approach was that I couldn’t over determine the outcome. You set something in motion and you look at it later. You think about it later and if it stands the test of time then that one worked and that one didn’t. But it’s not about it working in terms of the art object. Being a kind of conceptual project, those rules didn’t apply. That was a nice thing about those works.

S: That’s interesting. This comes back to, perhaps, how photography has changed since you started doing that, and how your work has evolved since the early 90’s. You were taking those photographs with an SLR camera and regular film, just going to the lab and coming back. You knew that what you saw was honest, in a sense, that what got, what turned into a photograph was light bouncing of you and registering on emulsion. And these gestural line drawings that you did subsequently had a similar quality. Doing something with a certain set amount of time there was a kind of immediacy and honesty there. But now a lot of your images go through the computer. There’s a more elaborate process of mediation and editing. Is that honesty still important in some way, or how do you think you convey that?
D: I guess the easy answer is no, I don’t think that it is as important. The photographic thing carries with it a certain imbued transparency. When you point the camera at yourself it’s a confronting thing, I have probably got just more comfortable with that, so therefore maybe it’s more honest… than before. The digital thing allows me more control over how I present the work at the end. Now I have the problem of it being either very simple or very complicated at the end. For me, it’s as if this technology has been built for me, for someone who has watched television their entire life. And now I have been given the television studio. I can do what I want with it, which is like a dream.

S: The duration of your video works has certain honesty to it, and they’re all single shot videos. There is no editing?
D: Not yet.
S: Not Yet?
D: But yes I wanted to keep it very simple to start with. Because I haven’t made a lot of video work… I wanted these first sets of videos to be about a certain type of activity and this activity to be painting. Some of them are painting with my hands, not with a brush, which is a really primitive way of making a work. I have to acknowledge that I am not a primitive person. I went to art school and grew up in the first world. With these new works they have something of that very immediate primal quality that I love.

S: I guess what seems apparent to me is that there has always been a duration in your work. Whether you’re photographing yourself everyday, executing a painting with a single line, or making a video of the painting process, your art always involves setting something in motion. Thinking about this in terms of self-portraiture, the self seems
to always be imbedded in its duration. Even though there mightn’t be a lot of action going on, life is about it’s duration.

D: Yeah, well, I guess that’s a realistic quality in the work. Also I have to say I’m thinking about my attention span in relation to watching television. It’s also got that. I love pop music and most of those songs, the good ones, are two and half minutes long. At the same time, some of those songs will last in your brain for rest of your life. You will remember that hook for the rest of your life, even if you only heard it once or twice. Because you can make something quite monolithic and memorable that is quite short, and I love that. And you can make it very quickly.

S: I like that idea; that your artworks are little refrains that hook your attention. And, like a memorable pop song, you can pass back into the duration of that refrain over and over again in a way that is different each time.

D: It gives the illusion of control over time, and also that you have an illusion of the control over the scale of experience. What may be a very insignificant thing to one person can turn into a monolithic experience for someone else; an intense and singularly important event. That’s what I loved about running a gallery because of the scale of the exhibitions that we ran; one person for one week. At a certain point it became very important to be there and then it wasn’t important at all, because it wasn’t on long enough. But yes, scale and time and these elements that a lot of people don’t necessarily think about obsessively, I do tend to think about a lot. I guess that’s what so attractive about video because you have such control over those elements. There’s no reason why any of those videos can’t be twenty-four hours long, if that’s what I wanted them to be. You just loop the image and run it over and over again. But the desire is not to want to do that. I don’t want people getting bored and restless. I want them to get the idea. There is a series of simple ideas that they can receive and that’s that.