Luke Willis Thompson: A Sister Image

by Frances Loeffler

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Luke Willis Thompson was the Chisenhale Gallery Create Residency artist (2016-17), culminating in the presentation of autoportrait *(2017) at East London's Chisenhale Gallery from 23 June to 27 August 2017. Thompson's video portrait of Diamond Reynolds builds on research he has made throughout his residency period, which began with an exploration into the history of the riots in London in 1981 and 2011. Thompson's new commission reflects his ongoing enquiry into questions of race, class and social inequality. In another recent moving image work,* Cemetery of Uniforms and Liveries *(2016), Thompson created filmed portraits of two young men from London whose maternal relatives were victims of police brutality. Winner of the 2014 Walters Prize, New Zealand's largest contemporary art prize, Thompson now lives in London.*

Photographic portraits have long been used as a powerful tool to subjugate and control, from anthropological and ethnographic representations to police and medical records. Today, photographic archives are surely taking on a new dimension, with proliferating quantities of images taken by body scanners, automated kiosks at customs and border controls, and facial recognition systems that are read, analysed and stored by companies and governments. The

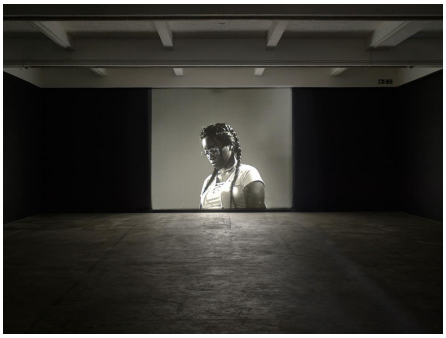
ubiquity of new digital imaging methods can provide a different type of photographic image, too, one taken by civilians, eyewitnesses and passersby to tell a story that might not otherwise be told. Consider the use of civilian camera footage in war zones, for example, which may provide a very different perspective to the official images of the state.

Luke Willis Thompson's new work for Chisenhale Gallery, *autoportr ait* (2017), touches on an incident in which camera footage gave just such an alternative story. In 2016 in Minnesota, Philandro Castile was fatally shot by a police officer as he sat in his car with his partner and her daughter, having been pulled over for a broken headlight moments earlier. His partner, Diamond Reynolds, streamed the immediate aftermath of the shooting on FacebookLiv e.[01] Viewed millions of times, the widely disseminated, harrowing footage sparked outrage, protests and debate. Despite this, and just days before the opening of Thompson's exhibition, news broke that Jeronimo Yanez, the officer who shot Castile, was acquitted of all charges.[02]

Rather than incorporating the live documentation of this event—a now depressingly familiar image of police violence against black communities—Thompson has made a filmic portrait of Castile's partner Reynolds. Shot on 35-mm film, the black and white, silent, single screen work shows Reynolds' face and upper torso, tightly cropped, and moving very little almost as still as a photograph. Sombre and elegiac, the film provides a stark counterpoint to the dramatic, shaky, quick-moving footage recorded by Reynolds herself (and the speed of the events between Castile being pulled over and his death—an astonishing 40 seconds). Thompson's portrait throws into relief this documentative footage, which despite its importance, impact, and the gut-wrenching horror of it, was inevitably destined to be quickly lost in mainstream media indifference and the unceasing waves of other 'breaking news'.



Luke Willis Thompson, *autoportrait*, 2017. Installation view, Chisenhale Gallery 2017. Commissioned by Chisenhale Gallery and produced in partnership with Create. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Andy Keate.



Luke Willis Thompson, *autoportrait*, 2017. Installation view, Chisenhale Gallery 2017. Commissioned by Chisenhale Gallery and produced in partnership with Create. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Andy Keate.

The artist used the same visual vocabulary for his 2016 work *Cemetery of Uniforms and Liveries*, two 16-mm film portraits made by the artist depicting the relatives of victims of state violence in the United Kingdom in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In this work, Thompson borrows formal cues from Andy Warhol's *Screen Tests* of the mid 1960s. With these silent black and white films, Warhol played on the expectation of the photographic portrait to reveal its subject. There are no props, no indications of context or background scene, only the simple instruction for the sitter to stare directly at the camera and neither move nor blink. Frames are slowed down to 16 frames per second, accentuating every breath, every movement of the body. As a result, viewers are made aware of the medium and the sitter's performance to camera, more than anything else, a point made more intense by the celebrity status of many of his sitters. We may think we 'know' them, but we know only an image that itself only documents a performance.

Thompson's use of these artworld frames runs certain risks, particularly given the rawness of the subject matter for the families and communities involved. With their classic pictorial tropes, intense cropping, and rich gradations of black-and-white, these visually sumptuous portraits could be in danger of aestheticising a moment of deep trauma, erasing any visible evidence of violence or harm. Thompson goes some way towards addressing this, however. For a start, with both *Cemetery of Uniforms and Liveries* and *autoportrait*, he met, spent time and developed relationships with the subjects of his portraits. In a rece nt interview[03] with Tobi Haslett in Mousse Magazine, he has

described the conversations he had with the sitters, in which they discussed and planned the deliberate construction of the image and the possible repercussions and effects it might have. The fact that this would ultimately be a portrait 'performed' for the camera was never in question. With *autoportrait*, Thompson travelled to Minnesota early in the process in order to meet with Reynolds and her lawyer and start a 'collaboration', as Thompson describes it. He travelled to Minnesota a second time in April in order to shoot the work.

It is also worth noting that extended artwork labels give important details about the subjects. In *Cemetery of Uniforms and Liveries*, for example, a text on the screening room's exterior wall explains that one portrait is of: 'Brandon, the grandson of Dorothy 'Cherry' Grace, who was shot by police in her home in Brixton, in 1985. Brandon was born in London and now lives in Crystal Palace.' And the other is of: 'Graeme the son of Joy Gardner. Joy was killed by Police in her home in Crouch End, London, during a dawn raid for her deportation in 1993. Graeme was born in London and now lives in Tottenham.' This information is doubly important given that the subjects themselves don't have a voice in which to identify themselves in these two silent films. In the case of *autoportrait*, the lack of clear, spoken narrative was in part due to protective legal requirements that Reynolds not discuss the case. Nevertheless, we see her lips move inaudibly, as though singing, suggesting a voice taken away (or never granted), or perhaps voicelessness as protection. The 'Miranda warning' of the right to remain silent, or the struggle to speak and be heard.



Luke Willis Thompson, *Cemetery of Uniforms and Liveries*, 2016. Installation view Le Grand Balcon Montreal Biennale. Courtesy of the artist, Hopkinson Mossman, Auckland and Galerie Nagel Draxler, Berlin/Cologne. Photo: Guy L'Heureux.



Luke Willis Thompson, *Cemetery of Uniforms and Liveries*, 2016. Installation view Le Grand Balcon Montreal Biennale. Courtesy of the artist, Hopkinson Mossman, Auckland and Galerie Nagel Draxler, Berlin/Cologne. Photo: Guy L'Heureux.

Finally, it is significant that Thompson never uses imagery from the event itself, but always focusses on a close-family relative of the victim. The result of this remove is to help us remember that those affected are not just a statistic, but real people, with loved ones, families, lives. Also, to consider such events, not as a fleeting moment lost to history, but as an ongoing trauma that continues to touch the lives of those with whom they were close, and the communities forced to keep suffering such injustices. As recent events attest, the conditions for such events to occur again—and for the inevitable, heartbreaking documentation to be circulated on the Internet—are far from mitigated. This is particularly poignant with *Cemetery of Uniforms and Liveries*, in which tragic events from the 1980s and 1990s are just as likely to occur today, particularly in the current atmosphere of anti-immigration sentiment.

Clearly, the events, people and actions surrounding the image, are an integral component of these works, and have to be taken into account. Each of these portraits is 'haunted' by another image, another photograph or video widely circulated in the public domain. In this respect, Thompson's works can be seen as a type of expanded portraiture, in which prior events and relationships are crucial to the image seen in the gallery, as is the sitter's complicity and consent. Warhol had an early interest in depicting the twentieth century's breaking news events, in his *Death and Disaster* series, for example. Thompson eschews this for the reduced form of his 'screen tests', a cinematic language that invites questions of mediation and representation to come to the fore. Above all, Thompson's work reminds us of the camera's role as a tool of subjugation and violence, both in history and now (it is worth noting that Warhol's were inspired by criminal mug shots). Witnesses with cameraphones can create alternate images that tell another story, though they don't always lead to legal justice. Thompson asks that the FacebookLive footage—a fateful twist on Warhol's Internet-pre-empting '15 minutes of fame'—not be the image that ultimately defines Diamond Reynolds. Is there a way to construct an alternative image that offers an 'escape' from the camera's policing gaze, from violence and erasure? Is there even a way to 'represent' such trauma, particularly in our current age of increased surveillance and image circulation, when the politics of

representation matter so acutely.

Thompson doesn't claim to have the answers to these questions, but he does ask to spend time with the problem. His use of a different cinematic language, one from before the age of cameraphone footage and the Internet, attempts to provide an alternative type of image, a 'sister image', as he has called it, to the harrowing footage circulated by Reynold's online. With its pared-back, stripped-down form, Thompson's invitation to Reynolds asks whether a different kind of photographic image is possible, one that demands dignity, attention, and importance where time and again that has been denied.

Footnotes

01. Video footage streamed live by Diamond Reynolds on Facebook (9 millions views) and footage from the police car dashboard camera: www.nytimes.com/video/us/100000005181340/philando-castile-diamond-reynolds-and-a-nightmare-caught-on-video.html

02. Media coverage of the acquittal on all charges of police officer Jeronimo Yanez, who shot and killed Philandro Castile: www.theguardian.com/us-news/2017/jun/16/philando-castile-death-police-officer-not-guilty

03. Luke Willis Thompson in conversation with Tobi Haslett in Mousse 57 (February–March 2017): www.moussemagazine.it/luke-willis-thompson-tobi-haslett-2017/

Biographies



Luke Willis Thompson is a graduate of both the Städelschule Staatliche Hochschule für Bildende Künste, Frankfurt am Main and the Elam school of Fine Arts University of Auckland MFA program. Recent solo exhibitions include; *autoportrait*, Chisenhale Gallery, London, 2017, *Cemetery of Uniforms and Liveries*, Galerie Nagel Draxler, Berlin, and *Sucu Mate / Born Dead*, Hopkinson Mossman Auckland, both 2016. Recent group exhibitions include *Live Uncertainty*, 32nd Bienal de São Paulo, and *Le Grand Balcon*, Montreal Biennale, both 2016, and *Surround Audience,* New Museum Triennial, New York, 2015. He was the 2014 winner of New Zealand's Walters Prize.



Frances Loeffler is a curator and writer. She has held positions at a number of arts organisations worldwide, including Oakville Galleries, Toronto, White Cube, London, and the Liverpool Biennial. Artists she has worked with include Senga Nengudi, Etel Adnan, Cosima von Bonin, Christian Marclay, Runa Islam, Haim Steinbach, Zhang Huan, Allison Katz, Pio Abad, Tamara Henderson, and Shannon Te Ao, among many others. In 2011 she was Guest Researcher at the Jan van Eyck Academie in Maastricht and in 2009 she was Visiting Curator at the research and commissioning agency Situations in Bristol. She is an alumna of Independent Curators International. She writes frequently for a number of other art journals internationally.

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