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Playing and reality in the work of E J Major

This title refers to a book written by psychologist Donald Winnicott published in 1971, the year that E J Major was born. In the text which has long drawn the artists interest he investigates the role of play in both childhood and adult life and its connection to the development of the 'true self'. Play in adulthood can be many things including structured activity through sport or, more pertinent here, creative pursuits. For Major artistic activity is core to her sense of self and for her mental well-being. There have long been ruminations on the relationship between artistic talent and mental health. One need only think of the notorious mental instability of Vincent van Gogh or the contemporary artist Yayoi Kusama. It seems there are people who simply have to make art, it is an inescapable calling which it is wise to fulfil. Winnicott takes this to another level of observation seeing play / creativity as an essential part of peoples' identities crucial for the key early development stages of a child but also for adults. As the artist states:

“Perhaps some of us need to make this continued 'play', this symbolic negotiation between ourselves and the world, our primary activity. Illusion may well be a defensive activity but it is also a place of motivation and creation. If 'play', no matter what form it takes, is fundamental to our sense of self, it then also follows that an absence of 'play' will result in insecurity and detachment from one's sense of self. Taken to its extreme this will lead to breakdown. My experience here is that without my practice being at the very centre of my every day existence, I gradually fall in on myself.”¹

In Marie Claire RIP (2004-2007); Shoulder to Shoulder (2009-2011) and in her most recent works Everyday in November /when Nothing will Do (2015) Major herself appears in her work. You would not call these self-portraits but more that the artist is the performer in the work. Once this is known by the viewer it of course significantly shifts the works meaning.

Marie Claire RIP (2004-2007) was made in response to police mugshots taken of an anonymous woman's descent into drug addiction. These images were then published in a glossy women's magazine as part of a campaign to educate women, one assumes, to learn that drug addiction can impact negatively on their appearance. Major's response to what she found a troubling exposé of an unnamed individual was to meticulously recreate the series using herself as the subject. Working in her studio she spent time both in pre and post production stage of the work. In Major's version we see what we first read as a series of images showing us a woman's fall out of control only to realise that the woman we see is an artist in total control of her look, masquerading as another.

Shoulder to Shoulder (2009-2011) grows from investigations into the photographic archives of the UK Suffragette movement. The women of this early political movement were keenly aware of the potential of photography as a means of media manipulation. Working in the early 1900s they were staging events that would often translate well into images that were then published in newspapers of the day. Harnessing the visual impact of their staged public acts they were photographed chaining themselves to railings outside public buildings; hurling themselves in front of horses in races and carrying out street demonstrations with

¹ Major E J *Email interview with author 22nd November 2015*

banners. To get their message heard they were willing to shock polite society and the middle classes out of their complacency.

One act in particular, which in itself was not photographed at the time, involved a work of art and led to the temporary closure of the National Gallery in London. On Tuesday 14th March 1914 Mary Richardson attacked a painting *The Rokeby Venus* by Diego Velázquez. In the middle of the day, whilst the work was guarded by two gallery staff, the diminutive figure of Richardson took a small axe to the painting. She smashed the protective glass around it and furiously slashed the canvas. She was stopped and taken away to London's Holloway Prison, advocating the case of the suffragette movement as she went.

E J Major's work focuses on the moment before this act where she stands in for Richardson and looks at the painting wrestling with the decision of whether to commit the act or not. Talking about why she was drawn to the subject the artist states:

"When Mary Richardson took an axe to *The Rokeby Venus* in 1914 it was not just the destruction of property; it was the destruction of a particular kind of property, art. Such an act unnerves me even in a context in which I believe in the struggle ie the suffragette movement. It raises complicated questions regarding the making of art in relation to values, both economic and moral. It's these contradictory responses that interest me and that inform my work." (2)

In both these earlier works the artist is using found photographs as the source of inspiration for her practice. Her more recent work *Every Day in November/When Nothing Will Do (2015)*, an installation in two parts, mines her own family and personal archive to make work. *Every Day in November* refers to footage shot each day of November 2011, running up to when the artist turned 40. The footage was compiled and exported as stills, a single frame per second. *When Nothing Will Do* are two films made of still image shots set in her family home in Malvern and also in her studio taken between 2010 and 2013. Many of the stills in the films show Major staging the shots with her parents or with her brother. We see glimpses of her family home and garage. The latter is full of boxes referring to her families peripatetic military lifestyle during the artists childhood. In this work she seems to be using her own story as a starting point for the piece. The work raises the question of who is in control as the artist shows us her at times clenched hand on the slow release button that will instruct the camera to take the shot. And yet there is a sense of claustrophobia in many of the images as we are seeing a number of alternate selves of the artist.

With her parents she is in formal attire playing the role of dutiful daughter, in the garage we see her in a puffer jacket in a space of introspection and reflection looking less posed and looking less directly at the camera. The work seems to raise the question of family dynamics and to investigate how our identity is built up with the help of photographs which seem to place us and are supposed to tell others who and what we are. But of course they do not tell the whole story of our complex shifts and morphing of personality and character in different situations during our lives. On one level the work appears to be more personal than previous work and yet on another it is no more revealing or confessional than any of her other works.

² Major E J *Email interview with author 7th July 2015*

Relating back to the title of the show we seem to see here shifts between the artist in moments of depression and when her sense of self seems limited to fitting in with others in the family. We then see moments of reflection and acting / performing in the landscape where she seems able to be her 'true self' as Winnicott would describe it.

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