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Camilla Brown / [Playing and reality in the work of E J Major](#)
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In 1971, the year that E J Major was born, the psychologist Donald Winnicott published a book titled *Playing with Reality*. In the book Winnicott 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. It seems there are people who simply have to make art, it is an inescapable calling which it is wise for them to fulfil. Winnicott takes this to another level of observation seeing play / creativity as an essential part of identity development for children and 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]

Using the self and playing with identities has been a key part of Major's work over the years. 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 main protagonist. Once this is known by the viewer it significantly shifts the work's meaning.

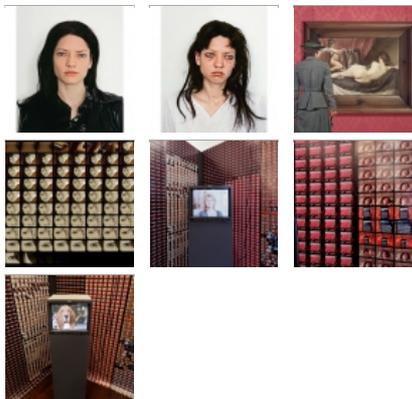
Previously Major has referenced found images in her practice. *Marie Claire RIP* (2004-2007) was made in response to police mugshots taken of an anonymous woman's descent into drug addiction. These images were then published in a glossy women's magazine. Major's response to what she found a troubling 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 the pre- and post-production stages 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, and staged effective political performances. 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, the diminutive figure of Richardson took a small axe to the painting.

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, i.e. 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 her more recent work *Every Day in November / When Nothing Will Do* (2015), an installation in two parts, Major 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* comprises two films made of still image shots set in her family home in Malvern and also in her studio



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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 family's peripatetic military lifestyle during the artist's 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.

In *Everyday in November* (2015) there is a strict methodology applied to Major's working process. There is almost a cruel discipline to this, which at times makes the work painful to view, and, one expects, difficult to make. We bear witness to Major forcing herself to be photographed at a time of great emotional strain. We see her creative blocks and her emotional and psychological state during the production of the work. She is at times making us see her suffering for her art, in a way many artists have done before her. This is not masochistic or self-violating in the way that the Viennese actionists were apt to be, yet there is a tension, an unease, in this work.

Making *Everyday in November* also involved an arduous and time consuming process, freezing each frame of the film and separating it out for us to see presented on large contact sheets in exhibitions. There is an element of repetitive activity that lies behind the work which seems more resonant of much older forms of artistic production. Months of time have gone into it and it is an almost perverse use of more recent camera technology, taking something of speed back to still images. Yet this slowing of speed and movement and slippage between moving and still image is a recurrent interest in Major's practice. It makes us as viewers slow down and take note, as well as literally slowing the movement of the film. Suddenly details and recurrent motifs that would have been background noise on a short film become visual statements, and gain greater significance.

On one level this more recent series appears to be more personal than earlier work and yet on another it is no more revealing or confessional than previous series. Relating back to the notion of *Playing with Reality* we seem to see her shift between various selves, showing the artist in moments of depression and despair and also playing a variety of roles in her family dynamic; as daughter, sister and artist. Somewhere amongst this we also see her reality or, as Winnicott would describe it, her 'true self'.

– essay by [Camilla Brown](#)

With thanks to [E.J Major](#)

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

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

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