

2008

Conversations on the Transience of Light.

Dialogue with André Croucamp, writer for the *Transitions* booklet accompanying the Paul Emmanuel: Transitions touring museum exhibition.

... it started out as an experiment ... an attempt to hold onto a moment that has already shifted into something else ...

... scratching away at exposed photographic paper ... what was a light-sensitive surface ... to control the process of drawing with light ... trying to reveal the image that might have been there ...

... copying my own photographic recordings of transient moments ... in a vain attempt to uncover what really happened ...



conversations on the transience of light ...

between andré croucamp and paul emmanuel

paul: my desire to have this conversation with you has grown out of all our fabulous discussions on liminality ...

andré: ah yes ... the limen ... the threshold ... at one point you even thought of using 'liminality' or 'liminal' in the title of the exhibition ...

... to refer to rites of passage ... when people cross thresholds ... transitions ...

i wanted to capture that liminal moment when something is changing from one thing to another ... a man changing from one thing to another ...

... you're trying to capture that in-between space where categories become temporarily blurred ... taxonomies falter ... assumptions are suspended ... and the opportunity for radical change opens up ...

something impossible to capture ...

... i understand that liminal moment as a moment when the individual straddles a threshold ... standing in two different realities simultaneously ... male/female, waking/dreaming, power/vulnerability, healing/suffering, life/death ...

... in that moment of change anything is possible for that person ... between worlds ... one foot in one and another foot in the other ... what are the possibilities?

life itself is liminal ... an in-between space ...

... we are not entirely alive ... what we experience as life exists in some transitional space between the ideals of life and death ... a phase transition ... a nexus where the trajectories of life and death, order and chaos, negative entropy and entropy, intersect ... a dynamic paradox ...

a lot of my work is like that ... it is about holding on and letting go ... while i'm doing it i think about death and being alive, about sleep and being awake ...

the word 'liminal' really changed my experience of life ...

... when i learnt of the word ... and realised that there was this in-between state ... i experienced some kind of backward propagation of information through all my memories ... like a piece of new code the word liminal recalibrated my entire life's experience ...

... it freed me from the expectation that everything had to align to some kind of simple moral binary ...

... it opened up my sexuality to possibilities that went beyond the conceptual constraints of a singular and exclusive gender identity or sexual orientation ...

... it turned my dogma and abstract morality into a dynamic ethical process that embraced complexity and change over time ...

... it allowed me to find the power in my weakness ...

... staying in that liminal space keeps one removed from the world ... with the viewpoint of the observer ... very intimate but very separate ...

i am in that liminal space right now ... but i need to go through the transition ...

the old alchemical formula 'solve et coagula' teaches us that we are always dissolving and coagulating ... are you about to coagulate into something when this whole process is over?

... mmm ... transitions has been very cathartic ... a process of moving on ... after completing this work i don't know what is going to happen next ... it's very scary ... the unknown ...

i went into the circumcision with a lot of preconceptions about what it would be like ... blood ... crying ... drama ... but no ... there was tenderness between the child and the surgeon ... it didn't feel abusive ... and yet some people would view it as abusive ...

... don't you wonder who the ritual is for ... the baby clearly won't remember the loss of his foreskin ... he'll only discover it in retrospect ...

i think a rite of passage has to have witnesses for it to work ...

... as a witness i experienced a weird kind of intimacy that almost verged on voyeurism ...

... were the witnesses using this cultural performance to limit or to free the child's identity choices? ... surely the symbols of his culture were there before he was born ... waiting to receive him ... to inform him ... without his consent ...

... after this series of images the men have no discernable faces ...

... I don't really sense the weight of ritual in the images ... they are more like glimpses ... they hint at a context ... but the context is lost ...

all rites of passage are dramatic ... but the arbitrariness of these images turns them into a fragile dance of light ...

... i only capture a gesture ... a calligraphic gesture ... a shape shifting ...

... time acts like a brush stroke through the images ...

... the images promise a narrative ... but they do not deliver ... as you try to make sense of them you realise they are arbitrary ... random ...

... or the viewers create whatever narrative they choose to create ...

the work has a very personal origin, coming out of my own dark spaces ... as a series of experiences with men over the last ten years ... transitions that represent those experiences ...

... i've been affected by men (i think) ... this is my emotional response to loss ... all the photographs are about loss ... memory and loss ...

... contemporary research into memory suggests that what we experience as the recollection of a memory is more of a reconstruction ... a stimulus in our environment will trigger a series of neural habits ... based on the pre-existing strengths of connections between neurons ...

... in this way the memory is reconstructed from scratch ... like a neural habit rather than something recalled from storage ...

... each reconstruction has new nuances ... new emphases ... random associations ... and even entirely fabricated elements that were absent from the original event we are trying to recall ... the fabricated elements of the memory cannot be distinguished from real elements ...

... our memories include a large dose of confabulation ...

so we're making it up as we go along ... cool bananas!

... i remember being afraid to fall asleep, being afraid of letting go of today's consciousness ... the person who wakes up tomorrow is not the same person ...

... there is something about your work that is like sculpting in marble or in rock ... the image you are left with is a result of the loss of something rather than the addition of something ...

yes ... i'm really working in a sculpting kind of way, like mezzotint and drypoint ...

... i've always worked reductively ... working from dark to light ... the way light would reveal something through highlights ... the romance of light falling on a surface ...

... it is as if you are reversing the photographic process ... projecting the light from your own memory onto the paper ...

... but unlike photography it is not instant ... you have to produce the image over many months ...

it takes forever ... believe me!

... even though you are trying to reproduce a transient gesture ...

your work is incredibly obsessive and yet it is all about impermanence ... letting go ... detachment ...

... i dunno ... i reject the bullshit philosophy of letting go of everything ... the idea that nothing can affect me or touch me ... what's that all about?

... i don't understand the skill of detachment as being cold and unaffected ... i still want to connect and resonate with the suffering or the joy of the person i am with ... when i am with someone i want to be totally present ... vulnerable to the engagement ... but when i am no longer in their space i want to be able to let go and move on to the next intense experience of connectivity ...

... continuing to carry them in my head is not in any sense a real and effective connection ... it's just sentimentality ... a distraction from what is going on now ... if you keep holding onto them in your head that is a projection of your own needs ... an obsession ...

self-obsession ... that's me, babe!

paul: the monumental stature of this guy ... while a phantom dances around him ... and changes him ...

andré: we like to think that there is an inner self that is coherent and continuous ... but i think this is an illusion ... men in particular have a need for continuity and coherence ... but it is being scratched away all the time ... trying to find the self is like trying to capture the essence of these images ...

... you don't get the thing you are trying to capture ...

i'm interested in romantic notions of photography ... capturing a moment and acknowledging the loss of the moment at the same time ...

... capturing the light on light-sensitive paper ... capturing the light that has bounced off a scenario that one has experienced ... that one believes to have existed ...

... but the impossibility of clinging to something ...

... I don't believe that there is an entity that inhabits or ghosts the brain/body complex ... there is only the process of the constantly changing relationships in a peculiar arrangement of energy, matter and information ...

there are habits ... yes ... patterns ... performances even ... that produce a temporary locus of feedback ... like your repetitive scratches they hint at something that is not really there ...

... your technique requires a huge amount of perseverance ...

making the drawing is laborious and repetitive ... almost meditative ... it is predictable over small areas, but the mark changes according to the surface you are describing ... i am trying to seduce the viewer into my experience of that surface ...

... the actual act of drawing this intensely for such long hours must change you physically ...

at one point i hadn't drawn for a week ... my muscles returned to normal ... when i started again i was in tremendous pain ...

... a focus on form tends to create the impression that we are somehow parachuted into a pre-existent reality, when in fact we are completely embedded in the relationships that make up the universe ... we are grown out of these relationships and continue to exist in relationships of mutual influence ... and we will dissolve out of these relationships into nothing ...

... the photographs that you work from seem to be very spontaneous, with very little interpretation ...

the images are captured in a documentary kind of way ... always from one viewpoint ... like i'm riveted to the earth, witnessing something unfolding ... transfixed by the spectacle ... by something quite simple ...

... then ... when i get the contact sheet my eyes sweep over the photographs ... in literally five seconds i see the image i want ... my consciousness usually objects ... i have to justify the choice to myself ...

... the moment i try to direct things consciously it doesn't work ... this is especially true of the last two series of images ...

... the liminal world of train stations ... always in transit ... coming from somewhere ... going somewhere else ...

you can spend your life in train stations ... a perpetual ride ... getting on ... getting off ...

... or standing still on the platform ... letting it all swirl around you ... this is where life comes to you ... then leaves you ... so close to people yet so alienated ...

maybe you'll get a glimpse ... but it's always only a glimpse ...

... the station images are purely documentary ... nothing i had control over ... my vision got lost ... the images i ended up using were not the ones i imagined using at all ...

... my vision dissolved ...

... lost in the indeterminacy of it ...

my fixation with the person is lost in the crowd ...

it's the most powerful series of images ... people forced through a funnel ... all the people are ghosts ... i left the shutter open and its almost as if they have become vapour ...

... the whole rationale comes to an end ... in the end you embrace the death of it ...

... dissolution rather than death ...

like all attempts to capture essence ... your project inevitably fails ...

... pure being ... has no diversity, or difference, within ... cannot be distinguished from anything without ... is not determined by anything ...

... has no intelligible content ... is the indeterminate immediate ...

... is no thing ... is nothing ...