

CATALOGUE INTRODUCTION TO 'GORGEOUSNESS' - A SOLO EXHIBITION BY GARY LEE

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What is it about Gary Lee's subjects that draws us into their world? Sometimes friendly, sometimes confronting, sometimes playing it up, at times a little aggressive, they regard us with a self-possessed and confident gaze. Almost always we are left with a strong sense of the personality being photographed, as if we ourselves are there, in the photographer's shoes, part of the strangely intimate exchange that is a photographic portrait.

The fact that Gary photographs only the male, combined with the 'gorgeousness' of this exhibition's title, might lead us to expect a preoccupation with surface, with notions of 'attractiveness' and sexual allure. The treatment of subjects like Chottu (2007) and Chris (2011) (not included in this exhibition), certainly veers towards the language of porn. All of these associations are there, of course, along with aspects of performance, identity, masquerade and interrogation of cultural stereotypes. This is a collection of work drawn from many periods of the artist's life, from diverse subjects and situations.

But Gary's notion of beauty is a complex one. It is not an idealised or glamorised condition, rather he seeks 'the beauty of the ordinary', and has often chosen to photograph men and boys whom he describes as 'unaware or disinterested' in their own looks. Sometimes these are people of the street, sometimes friends and family, sometimes artistic associates. Mostly, the 'sitting' is a simple proposition – the willing gift of a moment of time, on the street, in a room, in a garden ... owing little to elaborate photographic artifice. I've never watched Gary at work, but I suspect these images are not agonised about much, that set and lighting and props, if any, are impromptu and quickly realised, that there's not much coaxing but all about the person being photographed and what they choose to bring to the occasion. Gary himself talks of 'the male portrait, fixed in a moment, an exchange which is grounded in reality', and it's this 'grounding in reality' that for me delivers their special quality.

Photographic portraiture is one of the harder things to do well, perhaps more so now that digital cameras have made us all 'art' photographers, supplying the technical prowess once the preserve of long experience and expensive lenses. But along with painting and other forms of representation, we usually feel that a photographic portrait is successful when it gets beneath the skin of the subject, and reveals something of their inner life. When we think of Karsh, or Leibowitz, or Ricky Maynard's Wik Elders, or even David LaChapelle, expression is everything – whether documentary or 'set-up' in style – and what we experience is an amplification of individuality, an emotional magnification, a heightened insight into someone else's psyche. If they are famous, there is an added allure.

Gary's portraits do not seek, I think, to penetrate the soul in this way. Nor do they seek the ironic collisions of meaning seen in much contemporary photomedia. They are just themselves – benign, respectful, affectionate even. There is something very equitable about their atmosphere. The subjects are allowed to express just as much as they feel comfortable with. A thoughtful stare is common, but broad grins are also permitted. Often there is diffidence in the expression, an inward-lookingness, a dreaminess. Without fail the subjects regard us straight on, eye to eye, human to human. They are looking at Gary, the other participant in the exchange, and through him, at us. Without trying, Gary somehow slides under the barriers, and reveals to us a complex, real person. His beauty is simple, unadorned, uncomplicated.

In this he may be the inheritor of a long tradition of 'studio' portraitists who weren't trying for profundity, but ended up achieving it. I think of the late Michael Riley's portraits of his Dubbo family, simply posed and lit in front of a simple backdrop, each person presenting a restrained presence to camera ... thoughtful, dignified, contained. In Africa, the late Seydou Keita created an astonishing body of work as a jobbing portrait photographer in Bamako (Mali), as did the Paramount Photographers in Lagos (Nigeria). One also thinks of Shoichi Aoki's Fruits project (documenting street fashion) in Tokyo, or of German-American Martin Schoeller. All these photographers share a willingness to let the subject quietly be, and in so doing they may reveal to us far more about the human condition than more elaborate undertakings.

This is not to say that Gary's images are devoid of contextual resonances. His 'Art Boys' (Robert, Alfred, Jermaine) stand before Indigenous paintings of their own choice. Shannon as Billiamook echoes colonial photographer Paul Foelsche's 1880 portrait of Billiamook, the historic Larrakia figure (a connection more fully realised in the diptych Billiamook and Shannon). Self portrait with Manish puts the photographer himself in the frame, and the Bondu series (Hindi for 'friend') presents groups bonded by chance or birth. And not least, this exhibition reminds us of the glorious human diversity of our planet, and celebrates the complex interrelationships and cultural currents of our Asia Pacific world.

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