

CURTIS MITCHELL

Something Like Memory



Curtis Mitchell's images are deliberately, almost delicately, imprecise. They are also, in a sense, not his. As the New York based Mitchell puts it 'This series of prints is an attempt to take the specific memory of someone else's snapshot and turn it into a general image for public consumption. The anonymous picture is soaked in household chemicals, then rephotographed successively until an image of photographic quality has been restored.' Much of Mitchell's work, since the 1980's, first as sculpture, now as photography, has been concerned with detritus, damage and discard. The photographic image here, already a throw out, becomes the starting point for a chemical havoc and a pathos filled, futile, restoration of memory.

Mitchell's starting point is the found image - a moment of somebody else's life that has been discarded, but a moment that mattered enough to them, at the time, in the time that the photograph represents, to be preserved photographically. Some of these images are extraordinarily intimate. Why would someone - presumably someone close enough to be regarded as a friend or family member - decide to throw away the close up picture of the post-nuptial kiss that forms the basis for *Us*? The pathetic beginning of a Mitchell image, abandoned memory fluttering in the street or half-buried in the skip, immediately changes the nature of the subject matter. We are no longer dealing solely with the image on the paper, even before Mitchell sets about its dissolution, but with the subject who authorised its loss, the subject who was prepared to forget.

Forgetting, of course, is not one of photography's strong points. The medium exists, indeed, precisely to insist on preservation - not remembrance, necessarily, but keeping, and obviously keeping at that. As Roland Barthes observed, there is nothing Proustian about the photograph. In its superficial content the image does not exist to serve involuntary recollection, the remembrance of things past. The image is the object, always past, always now. To borrow a motif from the French philosopher Jacques Derrida, who uses the idea to metaphorise the condition of the human unconscious, we might want to think of the photograph as a kind of crypt. That is, a surface that is simultaneously "coded" - as the photograph is in its visual relationships of signifiers - and a place where the subject is "buried" - the photograph as a place of dead time. But crypts - at the same time as they conceal a death - also make their interments obvious.

The photograph, despite its flimsy materiality promises an obvious permanence. The subject, coded and buried in the image, is always there. We insist on its fixity: the fleeting shadows of Wedgwood and the proto-chemical photographers are relegated to footnotes, to prefaces of photography's history; image makers who are interested in something other than the fugitive - artists like Heather Ackroyd and Dan Harvey - are treated as eccentrics. We must have something to see, and in archive stable prints we must leave something for successive generations to see.

Why? What is photography trying to arrest here? Is it not simply that time can be stopped, but that the photograph might also dam up memory, keep it from running out, prevent our emotions from

changing the way we felt about a particular event, a certain person. There's something to be said in favour of fading, of accepting that our perspective on time past changes, but the photograph, as concept and as chemical or digital realisation, will not ordinarily allow it. The sloughed surfaces and distorted colours of Curtis Mitchell's pictures seem to me a more realistic appraisal of what the photograph should contain, especially contain if the medium is, as its early practitioners so earnestly proclaimed, "a mirror with a memory." To look at one of these images is to see the subject inside the crypt, the subject as still subject to a decay which the myth of photographic preservation hides. The rotted figure, melted and mottled by chemicals, is metamorphosed from specific icon of a moment into a generalised representative of all moments, all memories. As Maurice Blanchot put it, 'We are never more human than when we are dead.' There's something rather more natural, rather more us, about corrosion than the spectral perfection of the photographic subject.

To scrutinise an image such as *I(3)*, is to transfer the self-portrait from specificity to generality, with the added bonus that we don't know, indeed it's unlikely, that the original image was a self-portrait. Mitchell's title offers us the claim that I is other, Rimbaud's '*je suis autre*', on a plate, or rather a page. In its brooding presence, its retained, elemental power, which the size of Mitchell's image rather than the miniature of the original emphasises and perhaps wholly creates, the image conveys a residual sense of a dominant, confident, aware, self-identity. Those are, of course, all the characteristics we traditionally associate to the self-portrait. Mitchell's nomination of someone else's picture, someone else's memory, as a self-identity, whether for himself or the person who discarded that snapshot, reveals the fallacy of such thinking. We read those characteristics on to the face and the body from the title: We are never more posed, never less ourselves, than when we pose or perform for the camera.

Curtis Mitchell's pictures look something like memory. Especially, perhaps, they most resemble the memory of the event in the mind of the person who threw the photographs away. What was locked into the perceptual structures of human unconsciousness was never stable - not in the semi-permanent way that a photograph is stable - but over time it further and further corrodes until only a trace is left. There's a reasonable degree of certainty those stuck with that memory trace don't want it, any more than they came to want the once valued images they chose to discard. You might get rid of the material object, but you can't voluntarily erase the memory of their subject. Instead the past goes on rotting in your head, and Mitchell's discovery of your snapshots, their ruin, restoration and preservation, offers everyone else another snapshot of just how bad the past looks from here.

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