

## DEATH AND THE PORTRAIT: THE PHOTOGRAPHS OF ROB AMORY

Marcia E. Vetrocq

In 2004, London's Hayward Gallery hosted an international exhibition called *About Face: Photography and the Death of the Portrait*. With nearly two hundred works on view, the show was both an obituary and an inquest, as the curator-coroners identified the factors that had conspired to do in the genre of portraiture. The exhibition organizers argued that a quarter of a century of staged and manipulated pictures, from Cindy Sherman to Gillian Wearing, had discredited photography's proud claim to disinterested truthfulness, while the tyranny of narrow norms of beauty, abetted by today's proliferation of cosmetic and surgical interventions, had eviscerated the cherished but quaint notion that each individual's countenance develops as a unique register of experience, character, and the human capacity for inwardness.

Rob Amory began experimenting intensively with the camera in 2004, and launched his first series of digital portraits the following year. By the time the pictures debuted to the public in two exhibitions in the spring of 2006, he had compiled a portfolio of 75 likenesses. Photography may have been a new venture for Amory, but his ability to rapidly articulate thematic and formal parameters for the series was grounded in a veteran artist's discipline: he already had racked up a lengthy if restlessly episodic career, successively dedicating himself to kinetic sculpture, gesture painting, and computer-based abstract graphics. Amory turned to photography in response to an increasingly insistent urge to acknowledge narrative content, an urge that his previous work, hewing to the nonrepresentational orthodoxies of modernism, could never satisfy. It wasn't digital photography's mendacity and cunning that compelled him. Rather, he

was drawn to the medium's image-making immediacy, to the challenge of engaging directly with a living subject, and to the enduring fascination of the human visage in art, even after a generation of postmodernist skepticism. From Amory's perspective—to paraphrase Mark Twain—reports of the death of the portrait have been greatly exaggerated.

Amory knows only a handful of those he portrays; many are strangers referred by friends, while others are spotted on the street or in a restaurant, and approached by the artist with an invitation to be photographed. The first series was peopled principally by sitters from the community in and around Gloucester, Massachusetts, the coastal town where Amory lives. In March and April of 2007, using a mobile studio rigged in his New York hotel room, he sought to broaden the range of the portraits with faces that are more diverse in age and race. The compositions typically feature one person, though pairs and a few small groups occur. Each tightly framed portrait shows little more than the upper shoulders, neck and head. Some show less. The framing is achieved primarily in the camera, with little if any subsequent cropping. Subjects are set against a seamless black ground, evenly illuminated by a semicircle of eight strobes, and photographed with a shallow depth of field, all of which has the effect of emphasizing the most minute aspects of the face's frontal planes while minimizing the rounded volume of the head in space. Within a format so restricted, every errant hair, every efflorescence of pigment, becomes an event. The merest detail—the glint of a chain, the glimpse of a man's baby-pink tee shirt, the effrontery of a grimy fingernail—has a seismic impact. The exhibition prints are large and are displayed without a protective stratum of glass, a mode of presentation that eliminates the chilly, mirroring surface while rendering the image literally and metaphorically vulnerable.

Not being inclined to harbor any illusions about the capacity of a picture to penetrate a sitter's psyche, much less lay bare the soul, Amory describes himself as seeking an image that conveys a state of "nonwithholding," a brief ebbing of the subject's guardedness in the presence of the photographer. Amory maintains a distance of just 70 centimeters or so and uses a handheld camera during a session that lasts roughly three hours. He hopes to elicit not so much a willingness to engage the camera as the ability to ignore it. When he shoots a couple or a group, the goal shifts to pinpointing a moment when the sitters appear to be "comfortably separate together." The sought-after instant of accessibility or ease may occur in the aftermath of a sigh or a slight change in position, and it isn't to be confused with the relaxation routinely achieved by a subject toward the end of a sitting. The composition Amory eventually chooses to print—he shoots anywhere from 30 to 150 photographs—often turns out to have arisen early in the session, when his rapport with the sitter is still tentative and the mood in the studio remains in flux.

Amory edits out the compositions showing faces that are awkward or histrionic, but he allows more subtle indicators of expression, having accepted the fact that we are already wired to read caution in a sidelong glance, wry humor in a mouth's upturned corner, self-absorption in a faraway look. And we'll entertain any number of clichés about the correlations between wrinkles and wisdom, make-up and vanity, gay earrings and a free spirit. But the viewer's responses and associations aren't wholly predictable. Do we recognize ourselves in the faces Amory arrays? Are we repelled by the sheer proximity? Or do we divert ourselves with art-historical observations? The cell phone and the violin wielded by two of Amory's sitters seem to be emblems of the senses, as if taken straight from a lexicon of pictorial iconography. A sad-eyed woman wearing a full-

sleeved sweater and pearls places her hands behind her head in one of Western art's oldest glamour poses. Does she know?

The uniform dark background, which underscores the portraits' seriality and restraint, likewise enjoys a long history in Western art, where it has come to connote a certain human directness and authenticity, on the part of artist and sitter alike. It's an established device of old master painting—a more pertinent frame of reference for Amory than is the history of photography—and one that is employed with similar pointedness by Hiroshi Sugimoto for his “portraits” of wax museum statues and by Bill Viola, whose extra-slow motion videos of models emoting with caricature-worthy explicitness can seem to be photographs undergoing microscopic transformations. The 17th-century portrait has been mentioned as a precedent, but Amory's work shows none of that century's interest in chiaroscuro, with its sacrifice of clarity and information to the evocative play of light and shadow. For antecedents to the even illumination and hyper-rich detail of Amory's art, we have to look back further, to Hans Holbein's portraits in the 16th century, and further still, to the likeness of saints and donors painted by Jan van Eyck and Rogier van der Weyden in the 15th century.

When the early northern masters rendered the physical world with painstaking verisimilitude, they were, in effect, celebrating the infinite variety of Creation, a divinely engineered variety that was embodied in the particularities of a face no less than in the abundance of a landscape. From such a reverent perspective, God—not the Devil—was in the details. There is no implication of reverence when Amory makes a photograph. But he does evince a faith in the continuing meaningfulness of the portrait as a humanistic document conceived for a contemplative viewer. That conviction is reflected in Amory's determination to confine his manipulation of the image to making minor recalibrations of

color and to dampening the occasional highlight that has flared to white. There is no digital flattery, no tricky intensification of emotion, no indulgence in distortion.

Still, there is one significant exception to the rule. About a year into working with the portraits, Amory began to erase the reflections of the studio lights that appear in the sitters' eyes. The intention was to eliminate a distracting trace of the work environment. But the effect is far more consequential than that. Suppressing all signs of the eye's moisture and receptivity deepens the sitter's air of withdrawal and pushes the representation toward the condition of a mask. The portraits don't go so far as to convey the uncanniness of a death mask or post-mortem effigy, but the images do possess, regardless of the subject's age, a disquieting undercurrent of mortality. Extinguishing the eye's light in a high-definition print creates a paradoxical situation of physical vividness and spiritual "unpresentness." This doesn't quite coincide with Roland Barthes's melancholy assertion that all photographs, to the extent that they record what has been and is no more, are pictures of death. Rather, a portrait by Amory assumes the role of a different genre, becoming a still life, more specifically a *memento mori*, an arrangement of sensuous and symbolic features whose purpose is to remind us of the transience of all things physical and to stir an appreciation of the fragility of existence. Once we take that message to heart, the death of the portrait as announced in London becomes the very least of our concerns.

New York City, May 2007

© Marcia E. Vetrocq