

MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE

Geoffrey Batchen

They loom out of the darkness, as if hovering uncertainly between past and present, offering themselves for our scrutiny with an intensity that borders on the confrontational. Part of it is the look these people give us, staring at the camera for as long as 60 seconds or more, resulting in a kind of clenching of the eyes (as a sitter, you become aware of the sheer physicality of looking under these conditions, of the need to fight your eyes' desire to wander). Part of it is the texture of their skin, turned into rugged planetary surfaces by the tintype's peculiar response to colour and its high resolution of detail. And part of it is the differential focus with which these people are depicted – sharp in some places and strangely liquid in others – as if their bodies are floating in a primordial wet world with just the faces breaking the surface. For all these reasons, Keliy Anderson-Staley's tintype portraits are best described as otherworldly, rather than antiquarian.

The tintype, an American invention, was introduced in 1855 and continued to be widely used until the 1930s, making it one of the most enduring of photographic processes. The selection reproduced here is part of a collection of hundreds of contemporary examples taken by Anderson-Staley. Among their other attributes, these portraits – each designated only by a first name and the year of exposure – offer us a survey of race, gender, and age that considerably expands the primarily Caucasian version of American society recorded in nineteenth century tintypes.

As a collodion negative developed on a small sheet of lacquered metal, a tintype has the appearance of a positive print but no possibility of being reproduced in multiple manifestations. Each tintype is, in other words, a unique object. As a mirror image, tintypes also show an inverted version of their subject (what appears to be a right hand is in fact the left, and so on). To make her tintypes Anderson-Staley used hand-poured chemistry that she mixed herself according to nineteenth century recipes, period lenses, and wooden view cameras to expose positive images directly onto blackened metal (usually aluminum) plates. Exposure times are long by today's standards, and many of her sitters have made use of a hidden metal posing stand, its cold extensions holding the head steady as the seconds tick interminably by, counted off by the photographer.

These technical details matter. They help explain how these photographs come to look the way they do (why, for example, nobody smiles). Walter Benjamin evokes this look rather well in his 1931 essay "Little History of Photography", when he writes,

The first reproduced human beings entered the viewing space of photography with integrity – or rather, without inscription... The human countenance had a silence about it in which the gaze rested.... The procedure itself caused the subjects to live their way into, rather than out of, the moment; during the long duration of the exposure, they grew into the picture.¹

Perhaps that is what is most striking about these pictures: the people portrayed still appear to be growing into them, still seem to be in the process of becoming themselves. In this sense, Anderson-Staley's work transcends the undoubted curiosity value of her chosen medium. For, before they are tintypes, these pictures are portraits, portraits of contemporary Americans (perhaps, even, when seen collectively, a portrait of contemporary America). As such, they raise the whole question of photographic portraiture, of what exactly can be deduced about an otherwise unknown person from a mere picture of their face. These particular faces stare back unblinkingly, eyes unnaturally bright and piercing, as if intent on hypnotizing us, here on the other side of the page. It is unclear who is looking at whom, who is the subject of this act of looking. Is it them, or is it us?

The pictorial qualities of the tintype, its obvious artifices and self-conscious accentuation of surface appearance, make these questions unavoidable. They remind us of what we already know (but usually choose to suppress): that a photograph represents a truth-to-presence (it certifies that a person was once there before the camera, in some past moment in time and space), but not a truth-to-appearance. These tintypes don't look much like the people they represent; the process itself results in visible deformations of form and feature. And yet these same people seem so much more present than the subjects of other kinds of photograph, in part because the passing of time between then and now – a feature of all photographs – seems here to be flowing before our very eyes. In simultaneously drawing attention to both the medium's pictorial deceptions and its temporal peculiarities, these pictures insist that our relationship to photography hinges, not on truth, but on desire (on our own desire to transcend time and space by means of the magic of the photograph: to, as it were, cheat death). In short, the work of Keliy Anderson-Staley is an open invitation to see much more than meets the eye.

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1. Walter Benjamin, 'Little History of Photography' (1931), in Michael W Jennings, Brigid Doherty and Thomas Y Levin eds., *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press), 2008, 279-80.

Perspective

WHY LOOK BACK?

Joyce Campbell

The following text is the transcript of a talk given at the Monash University Museum of Art (Melbourne) symposium Archive States, Contemporary Art and the Document, in July 2012.

I'm going to talk about three projects that I've worked on over the last six years that can be seen as functioning as archives: "LA Botanical," "Crown Coach Botanical," and "Te Taniwha."

"LA Botanical" is most obviously, among these three series, an archive. It was my very personal response to the collapse of New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and the absolute abdication of responsibility by the US Federal government – which left their people to drown and starve and descend into chaos en masse during the week or so after the initial disaster: I was living with my husband and two-year-old son in Los Angeles at that time, and my very bodily response was to start scanning the landscape for food, medicine, weapons, fuel and the like. Walking in the hillsides around my home I saw real barley we could eat, walnuts, acorns, and then sacred datura and the castor plant – a source of lubricants, industrial and personal, as well as the deadly toxin ricin. Obviously, 14 million other Angelenos would soon have stripped the hills bare, but I was engaging in the kind of survivalist magical thinking that will be familiar to many parents here when I imagined I could save my son by harvesting this somewhat desiccated cornucopia.

"LA Botanical" refers to botanical knowledge that was either held by indigenous communities or which was brought to the city, with the plants, by immigrants steeped in subsistence knowledge. It was a concerted effort to archive wild plants with uses ranging from weaponry to pharmacology to entheogenic plants used for spiritual initiation and insight. I documented 45 functional plants as 14-inch-square glass plate ambrotypes – around life-size – and