

# Trish Morrissey, *Seven Years*, Gallery of Photography, Dublin, 4 March to 3 April 2005

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'Unpleasant' is perhaps a sufficient description of my first encounter with Trish Morrissey's current exhibition in the Gallery of Photography. The gallery was more a grey vacuum than a 'white space' as the wet, dreary day outside loomed in oppressively into the exhibition space. The pale faces of Morrissey and her sister, clad in the garish garments of the pre-nineties boom, coupled with their gender-bending performances, disturbed me. Not being in the frame of mind for prolonged viewing, I left. However, and this is a big 'however', I decided to persist with the show. On the day of my return a sunny, bustling market day vibrated outside the gallery window, and far from being alone I was surrounded by smiles and chitter chatter. My previous bemusement melted into amusement...

Morrissey's new works, entitled ***Seven years*** and consisting of ten large-format photographs, individually and collectively re-enact, re-invent and re-energise the stereotype of domestic photography. Morrissey, enlisting the help of her sister (her senior by *Seven Years*), using the template of the family photograph, performed, staged and produced a synthetic and generic family photo album.

The decisions surrounding Morrissey's preparation and field work for *Seven Years* reflect the overall blend of fact and fiction within the work. Morrissey gathered together the clothes and props from the primary source of her family attic and also from the theatrical wardrobe that are the charity shops and overpriced retro clothing shops in Dublin. She also used as her stage her former suburban family home and surrounding area. The combination of real and imaginary not only add up to an exercise in autofiction, but also allow the viewer in.

The voyeurism particularly associated with the medium of photography is counteracted by Morrissey, as she openly invites us to participate in the fun. The works, just like those 'out-take' photographs (of the browning, bending, furling, stowed-away-in-an-old-suitcase nature) which Morrissey's emulate, act as catalysts to our own memories. The imagery; the settings and the characters are familiar to us all. The semi-detached redbrick houses, the white rusting garden gates, the busily patterned sitting-room curtains, the ever-evolving fashions we all love to cringe at, the dog that looks like our old one, the chopper bike (the vintage Volkswagen beetle of the two wheel variety), the pallid faces and milky

skin of a time before our prevalent 'fake and bake' culture... the list goes on. It is as though Morrissey wanted to create something akin to the faceless life-size cardboard figures or 'standees' into which we stick our inane faces at the fairground.

No names, real or imaginary, appear beneath the photographs, just dates; dates potentially common to us all. One delighted co-viewer of the exhibition exclaimed that 'January 25th 1979' ( the date under one photograph) was her wedding anniversary; another beside me, pointing excitedly, apparently had "that very same coat." Smiles of reverie all around.

As is often the case with a lighthearted delivery, something deeper lurks within the photographs. According to Morrissey herself, this serious undercurrent lies in her aim to expose what she feels is hidden behind the incidental finger over the lens and concealed in the body language and gestures of those photographed; namely the tensions and anxieties which exist in any relationship and especially within the family. The vacant expressions of Morrissey and her sister can thereby be construed as a deliberate device. They serve as a constant reminder that the photographs are fabrications, but also they allow us to concentrate on the gestural language and stances of the characters. The awkward hand-on-shoulder pose, the coy eye anticipating the click of the camera and the barely restrained recoil of the embarrassed teenager as her uninhibited auntie enthuses an embrace; all these scenes are performed with the express aim of exploration and exposure of agitated or uneasy familial bonds.

Morrissey in her adept denunciation of the innocent moment simultaneously exposes our common careless disregard for the subtleties and shrouded insights contained in these familiar images. Nonetheless, Morrissey must surely be aware that performance is not unique to her recreations. Even in non-art, snap photography (and possibly even more so in the days before digital technology), the moment a camera is produced, people react, sometimes cowering on the side of shyness, other times playing up, revelling in the attention of the camera and the photographer. As many of the photographs in *Seven Years* deal with childhood and the 'coming of age' period, natural reticence and even mortification common to this age are likely to obliterate any revelations to be discerned from gestures and poses, thus limiting the possible insights Morrissey strives to alert us to.

That which I initially found disturbing about the exhibition, Morrissey's androgynous and ambiguously gendered characters, was what came to intrigue me. *Women with facial hair*, a previous work by Morrissey, consisted of a series of headshots of women with moustaches. But these were not freak-show characters, not easily dismissable as they were not presented in a comedic context. The women's facial hair was their own and they wore it nonchalantly, as much a conscious choice as were their plucked eyebrows and red glossy lips. Morrissey, recalling this earlier work in her current show, continues this

preoccupation and addresses the issue of gender expectations again. Exploiting her own and her sister's slight physique, often taking on male personae, Morrissey confronts and confounds our need to assign to a person a definite gender. In one particular photograph of two young men, *January 25th 1979*, as the two sisters become two brothers, Morrissey herself has a moustache. It is not, as you might expect, of the 'sticky tape-fake' variety, but her very own unplucked, unbleached, and unfettered facial hair. Again fact and fiction are blended.

The same young male character sports a thick mane, fashionable in the seventies, which in its time was a protest, "a sign that [this generation] did not accept the morality of the crop haired generation of bureaucrats which sired them".<sup>1</sup> We are reminded of the significance of hair as an identity marker through the vehicle of nostalgia-inspired hairstyles and fashions. Dating back to the seventies also, a fertile period for identity crises, we find the emerging movement of feminist art, and it is in the work of the female artists Adrian Piper and Cindy Sherman that we find the precedents for Trish Morrissey's art. Sherman was too a mistress of disguise, and Piper would often adopt an androgynous, culturally ambiguous persona. She would then walk through crowded streets, exploring the extent of beliefs and attitudes revolving around such identity markers as race and gender and the seeming superficialities of hair and clothing.

Morrissey has included two video works in the show, *Eleven and three quarters* and *Eighteen and forty-five*. Again, intentionally vague and unspecific titles. The former shows a young child chasing a rabbit outside, around a back garden. The unseen but audible noise and hustle-bustle of the antics inside remind us of the behind-the-scenes, the 'what's not seen' of any footage. The piece, shown on a domestic-scale television screen, does little more than remind of us just how boring other people's home videos can be to non-family members.

*Eighteen and forty-five*, however, is a thoroughly enchanting video piece. Undemanding time-wise, at just two minutes long, the almost hypnotic effect of the film leaves one wanting at least one more viewing. Waltzing, gramophone-esque music begins, transporting us to a place of reverie and wistfulness as a headless figure (which brings to mind Kathy Prendergast's delicate fibreglass work *Waiting*, in the collection of the Hugh Lane Municipal Gallery) appears in a pale satin ball dress and pink slippers. As the figure dances so does the dress. Full of life, it swings and sways like an animate entity in itself. After we adjust to the lively movement and changing postures of the sprightly body, we become aware of the static environment. The harsh concrete paving, darkened pebbledash wall and the exposed drainage piping are the antithesis of the aspiring glamour of the bridal / ball-gown. The young body that inhabits the dress slowly becomes the body of an elderly lady. At first unsure and reluctant, the older figure steps back, perhaps away from the camera, the viewer or the memories, but then slowly her aging and frail limbs succumb to the music and begin to relive the romance. The old dress was worn by both Morrissey and her

mother, respectively eighteen years ago on the occasion of her debutante ball and forty-five years ago at Mrs Morrissey's wedding. As the two women re-enact their time in the dress, the garment takes the place of the photograph as the memory trigger. As is the case with *Seven Years*, the most pertinent themes are time, time lapsing and of course memory. It does not seem over zealous to suggest another agenda; once again, the female condition. Though the body clearly changes, the unyielding domestic setting does not. It appears that the two figures are surrounded, enclosed by a cage of domesticity, as a clothes line, complete with tawdry underwear pegged on, completes the circumference begun by the back wall of the family house. The figures are imprisoned; reliving moments of escapism, which are but that, fugitive and fleeting.

Throughout the exhibition it is insightful to take note of the choices Morrissey has made, her conscious inclusions and exclusions. Male characters are represented as opposed to present; there is a clear avoidance of using any real male figures. She has worked with and within the environment which she knows best, in which she grew up, middle-class suburbia in the seventies and eighties. Morrissey's work is therefore extremely self-reflective. Not only is she examining the everyday fruits of her own chosen art medium in the hands of the layperson and the covert significance of these images, but *Seven Years* and the accompanying two video pieces imitate and deconstruct the parameters of her own family life as she saw it growing up. For this reason 'autofiction', a term normally associated with literature, seems appropriate.

Morrissey's exhibition undoubtedly works. It works on different levels. If you wish to merely enjoy the whimsy, the humour, or the contagious nostalgia, fine. If you wish to dig deeper, look longer and think a little harder that's also fine, *Seven Years* will reward you for doing so. As potential co-producers and not mere voyeurs of the works in the exhibition, the choice is ours. Lucidity, lack of pretension and the combination of a genuine interest in the stuff of everyday life and the more profound questions which bridle our often oblivious existence, might suffice to replace my hasty judgement, and 'unpleasant' branding of this exhibition. One photograph, *October 1st 1987*, differing significantly from the others, shows another photograph being taken. Within this tangible photograph, and excluded from the imaginary one the performers are mid-composing, is the striking image of a thin, fresh and green tree growing outwards and upwards from within a girthy, dark tree. Apart from the tree within a tree, photograph within a photograph analogy, there must surely be a poetic metaphor for Morrissey's *Seven Years* to be teased out.

1. Germaine Greer, **The Female Eunuch**, 1971

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