A Review of Faces of War

Gabrielle Goliath at Goodman Gallery

By Nicola Kritzinger
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The phrase ‘Faces of People who may or may not be Victims or Perpetrators of Domestic Violence’ is pasted on the wall that guides the viewer into Gabrielle Goliath’s exhibition ‘Faces of War’ at the Goodman Gallery in Johannesburg. On either side of this wall there are photographic images of faces, an equal number of men and women, curated alternately. You can hear aspirations of breath from inside the gallery and the grey walls set a sombre tone against the ultra gloss of the works to either side of the entrance.

It takes me a moment to realise that the faces hanging here, reminiscent of intrusive Chuck Close portraits, are, in fact, mirror images. Goliath, in her first solo exhibition at the Goodman, has taken one side of each face and duplicated them, creating perfectly symmetrical mirror images of each face, producing something not quite human: they look disturbingly alien. She has closely cropped these images in a landscape format, leaving grey areas on either side of the person photographed, departing from a traditional portrait format. What is more, the resolution of the photographs shows every crease, each pore, individual hairs, the patterns in their irises and the marks on their skin so clearly that it feels as if you are invading the personal space of these subjects.

Being so close to someone that you can see this kind of detail usually means that you can feel their body heat and smell their breath - an intimacy granted to few people outside lovers, children or medical specialists. Being so close to a stranger feels like a disturbing intrusion of their privacy. It makes the viewer feel like they are, perhaps, perpetrators in an act of violence. The direct stare of the photographic subjects is confrontational and intimate in a way that makes them difficult to engage with.

Looking at each image, one becomes aware that both the viewer and the faces from the other portraits are clearly reflected in the shiny surfaces of the prints. This has the effect of including the viewer as well all of the other portraits into the dialogue of each subject. Goliath seems to be raising the question as to whether the viewer is the victim or the perpetrator. Here I found myself searching for a narrative: it is an effort not to be drawn to the conclusion that all the young men are perpetrators and the elderly, victims - such are the stereotypes around strength and weakness. This effort in itself reminds one of the dangers of assumptions.

But what intervenes in this interaction is the symmetry of the faces. That is to say, it creates caricatures by removing them from reality, hiding and obscuring the evidence of what lies on the other half of the face. As Alexandra Dodd writes in Intimate Warfare: ‘What stands out about these portraits is everything we don’t know about them – the information both visual and verbal, that is

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missing from the picture. Not only is it missing; it has been purposely erased, extracted, redacted…’

Goliath is successful in instigating curiosity and thought processes relating to abuse. Moreover, the silence that dominates this exhibition reiterates the silent, private, and often ‘faceless’ nature of domestic violence.

Goliath’s video of Christolene is of a woman who is presumably relaying an account of abuse to the viewer, although her words have all been edited out to leave only her pauses and breaths. One sees her wipe tears from her eyes, sigh deeply and pause for moments of consideration. This work is the most intimate and disturbing to watch of all the video pieces. It is deeply unsettling in its silences, and the subject’s non-verbal moments are heart-wrenching. The ‘silencing’ of the account - rendering this person voiceless - emphasises once again the silence of victims as well as perpetrators of abuse. It is truly a challenge to consider this woman as the perpetrator, but these may, after all, be sighs of remorse or guilt, rather than the account of a victim. But the censorship employed in the editing of these videos does seem to reiterate the inability of many to speak up about their suffering.

This exhibition has a focus on the absent. But what is surprising is the absolute absence of children. This seems, perhaps, to emphasise their own voicelessness even more so than the breathy voicelessness of the women in the videos, in a loop, always just about to say something. Warren Siebrits wrote of Goliath’s 2010 work Berenice that: ‘The absent made present is the power of this deceptively simple-looking series of photographs’. In this series however, the presence is made absent.

Not to be missed are Goliath’s drawings and etchings in the room to the side of the main exhibition. The drawings are made from stills from the videos, and the prints are five studies based on the German pacifist Ernst Frenich’s Krieg Dem Kriege (1924). Frenich portrayed soldiers grievously injured in the ‘war to end all wars’ in an attempt to show people the true horrors of war. Throughout the exhibition, Goliath connects with the viewer on a very human level, albeit a discomfiting one.

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