

REVERIES

Photography & Mortality

Helen Ennis

REVERIES *Photography & Mortality*

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NATIONAL
PORTRAIT
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THE UNIVERSITY
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AUSTRALIA

TELL ME HOW YOU DIE
AND I WILL TELL YOU
WHO YOU ARE.

Octavio Paz, 'The Day of the Dead' in Robert Fulton, ed.,
Death and Identity, New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1965

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Curator's acknowledgements

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Director's foreword

IN 2004 THE NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY PARTNERED WITH the newly revitalised University Art Museum at The University of Queensland to mount *To Look Within*, a survey of the artist's self-portrait in Australia. That exhibition focused largely on the painted self-portrait and it was always intended that a further exhibition would examine the photographic self-portrait in Australia. When I discussed the idea with Helen Ennis she immediately countered with a proposal that took the idea of the photographic self-portrait into an area of profound significance; she revealed that for a long time she had been thinking about photographic self-portraits made in the presence of mortality. The idea developed further and the result, *Reveries*, has emerged as one of the deepest and most important projects to be mounted by the National Portrait Gallery. In bringing the idea to fruition we have been assisted by two institutions; we are grateful to the University Art Museum for their assistance with the catalogue and to the Australian National University School of Art which has made it possible for Helen Ennis to work on the exhibition.

Reveries examines a question of undeniable significance—how do we face death? There are two dimensions of importance to this question. As an institution specifically devoted to portraiture, a National Portrait Gallery will always have a commemorative role. In this context it is always relevant that creating portraits is a strategy by which we hope to cheat death. A portrait preserves a living likeness that we know will pass away. Throughout history portraits have been motivated by a desire to transcend death and achieve immortality. Yet even where immortality is not an explicit motivation in their creation, portraits

stand outside of time. This has been an observed phenomenon of photography, a medium that subdivides time, able to preserve only the minutest moments of the broad flow of a lifetime.

The way in which we face death is now an issue of widespread community debate. This debate, prompted by the prospect of an ageing population against a background of the possibilities held out by medical science, reveals that there are as many positions on death as there are individuals. There are complexities and nuances, shades of feeling and belief. Art illuminates these positions and helps us to see a range of individual responses. The resolute understatement and meditative quality of so many of the works in *Reveries* attests to the truth of a stanza in Joseph Brodsky's great poem 'Nature Morte';

Scythe, skull, and skeleton –

An absurd pack of lies.

Rather: 'Death, when it comes,

Will have your own two eyes'.

Andrew Sayers



I HAVE A STORY TO TELL YOU ABOUT RITUAL OR, TO BE MORE PRECISE about the ritual of an elderly woman, Jean, who was a friend of mine. When she was in her early nineties she told me that she had found a new pastime which gave her an immense amount of pleasure. Every night during the late summer months she would take off her shoes and stockings and sit outside on a chair on her front porch. There, for hours, she would watch the stars moving through the sky. She said that I would be amazed at how many falling stars she would see during a single night. She also told me that she didn't know why she hadn't thought of doing this before—she supposed she had been too busy—why it had taken her so long to discover the joys of this nightly ritual.

I often think of Jean sitting there, bare-legged in the dark, rapt in the movements of the stars.

While neither of us could have anticipated it, these ruminations on mortality eventually became one of the many prompts for this exhibition. Another was this photograph taken by WH Corkhill more than 100 years ago. It surprised me when I first came across it because it was unlike anything else I had seen. More importantly, it is one of those photographs that can't be easily absorbed or assimilated, which causes a disruption—emphatically transforming 'reality' and making it unstable.

Very little is known about Corkhill's photograph but its disruptive effect isn't simply a function of the lack of factual information. It is to do with the image itself and its ambiguities in particular. Is the child a boy or girl? How old is he or she? What is happening to him or her?

The narrative I've settled on for the time being is this: the child is close to death (probably from one of the ubiquitous illnesses that kept childhood mortality at high rates until the early twentieth century). The woman who holds her is her mother. She, or another member of the family, has asked their local photographer to come to their home and photograph them together. They all know that this is a critical moment in the child's life, probably the last time that she will be photographed.

Corkhill's photograph is very specific. The mother and child and the material substance of their little world are delineated in exacting detail; the qualities of the fabric of the mother's dress and the timber wall immediately behind her are highly textural, almost palpable. Nonetheless, and this phenomenon never ceases to amaze me, there is much that connects this photographic image to others produced several decades later, those which are featured in *Reveries: Photography & Mortality*. The most striking point of connection is the mother's mode of address to the camera and the expression on her face—direct, grave and knowing. There can be no doubt that she is totally aware of the situation, fully conscious of mortality.

Like other photographs in *Reveries* the external world has been emptied out of Corkhill's image and all energy is directed inwards. It is not only the effect of interiority that is shared, but the emotional intensity of the photograph as well. Then there are recurring visual elements, such as Corkhill's use of a relatively close vantage point and the dominant elliptical shape in the composition formed by the mother and her child. The latter is especially significant because it raises the matter of archetypal and universal imagery. In this case it is the Pieta, the classic image of maternal suffering in which the Virgin Mary holds the dead Christ.

And lastly, there is the light; the bright, insistent presence throughout *Reveries*. It is as a portent or apprehension of death that literature, in fiction and non-fiction. Anne describes her own experience of this as 'an eddying, yellow leaves falling... a shower of falling of the bright'.

The final prompt for *Reveries* I want to mention is a baby boy who died a few hours before his birthday. To honour his life, he was there for us all to see—you might expect, but lying in his bassinet had placed him and where friends had sprinkled flowers. His life was celebrated with music especially for him, poetry and a eulogy given and talked to, whispered to, sung to, touched, photographed as he had been many times before. A momentous arrival—with his mother, his father, other members of his family—photographed in his hospital crib and in his home. All this helped me realise that, when it comes to photography, it isn't necessarily a separate activity carried out elsewhere—it can be part of a whole range of life practices. These events also made it clear that something to the real world and its evidential authority would suffice.

These are some of the prompts but what *Reveries* is concerned with mortality gets to the heart of dying and death in contemporary states of heightened awareness and conscious