

A Matter of Undoing

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Writing a text, particularly a text for which one is tasked with gathering the right words to explain and interpret the work of an artist, is largely a matter of erasure. Reading back repeatedly over what has been written, one elects to leave out an unhappy adverb or replace an ambiguous turn of phrase. Through this gradual removal of pieces, this distillation, one is able to build, to bring unruly thoughts and opinions to order, and give more concrete and economic shape to one's ideas.

It took a young and wilful Robert Rauschenberg one month, and some forty erasers, to create his *Erased de Kooning Drawing* in 1953. What remained, after so much effort, was a surface and composition every bit as compelling as that which it had so brazenly replaced. The new work was, his close friend and companion at the time Jasper Johns said, an “additive subtraction”. As hard as he tried, Rauschenberg was not able to eliminate fully the traces of the older artist's hand. What he succeeded in creating instead was an entirely new work in which the marks of his own effort can be read alongside, and to a large extent indistinguishable from, those they had attempted to usurp.

The work of Michael Huey deals, in an altogether more restrained manner, with similar issues of erasure, loss and displacement. He has been engaged for several years in an investigation of his own family history and genealogy, principally through the study and re-presentation of historical photographs of relatives, many of whom are no longer alive. The subjects, and the moment in which they lived, now exist in that ambiguous space between fiction and reality, both within reach and irretrievably lost. A more recent body of work has turned his focus toward a different constituency of individuals: unknown men, women and children, captured sometime in the 1940s by anonymous photographers, who entered the artist's possession as part of a bundle of 35mm Kodachrome transparencies purchased at auction.

To the viewer they are, of course, all unknown, family of the artist or not. Fiction would appear to outweigh the real. But look again, more closely, and you will discover a series of associations, signs, and references to time and place that ferry you back to events in your own life. The weave of personal and collective narratives that Huey develops, and turns over to us, is both complex and alluring.

The hand of the artist is deliberately understated, and as a consequence prone to misunderstanding. For one thing, it assumes a largely curatorial approach to material, eschewing grand gestures of individual authorship in favor of a more gentle, measured intervention. Having selected and reframed his images with a minimum of modification, Huey introduces them into a context, and to an audience, quite different from those for which they were originally intended. They are not *objets trouvés* in the mutinous, Modernist sense of the term. Even if they might at first glance appear ordinary, there is no ironic or provocative commentary to accompany them, they have not been dissociated conceptually—magically—from an intended utility, and their appearance within an exhibition is not intended as a protest against any supposed hierarchy of art forms.

Rather, it is the simple, curious, emotive charge of the object, the image, that interests Huey, its quiet dignity and capacity to assume the role of personal or surrogate metaphor. It is the paradox of wanting to depict something that no longer exists, and the challenge of doing so in a significant,

inclusive manner without recourse to the quick, formulaic dash of mournfulness or nostalgia with which art can too often content itself.

A recent image is based on an old portrait miniature, the delicate features of which have been accidentally smeared to the point of illegibility. There are few things more distressingly eloquent than an erased human face, particularly when sufficient traces of it remain to horrify through their very lack of humanity. The many layers of undoing within the image are both acknowledged and answered by the artist's discovery, recognition, and sensitive rehabilitation of it — through a careful process of revision and review — as part of a group of works he introduces into a new set of cordial, even familial, relationships with each other.