

## Bacon's dog: Dani Marti's portrait of Peter Fay

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IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY the male body still bears the heritage of past expectations. Supposedly self-assured, direct, in control and decisive by nature, the male body's omnipotence is a birthright. But this is the archetype of youth. Over the last six years, in an extraordinary series of video portraits and most recently in *Bacon's dog*<sup>1</sup> – whose subject is the artist, curator and collector Peter Fay – Dani Marti has explored the terrain at the opposite end of the spectrum: the constructions of masculinity and ageing.

While one might cite the practices of Chuck Close and the late John Coplans, in contemporary art history women have traditionally been in the forefront of the examination of this subject matter. In the hands of such artists as Louise Bourgeois, Donigan Cumming, Cindy Sherman and Tracey Emin audiences have become accustomed to the somewhat negative tropes of the grotesque, abject and uncontrollable female body, reiterating in many ways pre-existing societal prescriptions and descriptions associated with ageing. In spite of the imperatives hammered home by popular culture – 'being fit', 'staying fit', 'looking young' and the technologies to go with these concepts, age is still presented as a slow narrative of decline and loss of function. Marti's work, however, demands a reconsideration of such clichés. Perhaps even more significantly, *Bacon's dog* calls into question the genre of portraiture and its relation to recent developments in photography.

It is a truism to describe this century as media/image/information-saturated, however what is exciting is how the Zeitgeist reveals itself in creative processes. For example, in Marti's work, rather than a separation between subject and maker there is an intimate complicity. This is the result of our now pathological addiction to documentation. Possibly due to the miniaturisation of technology, the camera, once an instrument to be feared because of its perceived ability to record the truth, is now habituated. From the mobile phone to Skype, to surveillance cameras and

social networking sites, every act, every thought can be recorded. It is rare that people are mawkish and unprepared for the lens. In Marti's video portraits, the subjects are comfortable enough to speak directly to the camera or engage in conversation so that the artist becomes something of an ethnographic collaborator, negotiating the creation of what has become an archive of psychobiographical snippets. The information revealed in these confessional exercises is so personal that the audience is compelled to pose the questions: When are we most ourselves? When are we not performing? Then there are questions that revolve around reception: What are the processes we employ to read personality, and so on? In all of these video portraits Marti's physical and psychological presence is ever present. Rather than the 1970s-style grand auteur, he is an artist who provides a free space for communication.

Put simply, the words 'portrait', 'portraiture' and 'portrayal' refer to the activities of artists and writers who make works to describe the individual human subject. The appeal of this type of work is that the successful portrait is both a revelation of the unique characteristics and qualities of the person as well as a reflection of general humanity. Emerging as a distinct genre within the visual arts in the late fourteenth century, the portrait's initial purpose was as a *memento mori*, an object of commemoration and recollection.

Because they are photographs that move and talk, Marti's video portraits become even more glamorous fictions than the traditional framed portraits of old. Yet because they are the products of photographic technologies his works retain vestiges of the aura of truth. They also illustrate the pervasive influence of pop psychology, where the notion of the 'talking cure' is ubiquitous. (Thank you Oprah.) Marti is keenly aware of the power of narrative. As Oliver Sacks has stated: 'each of us constructs and lives a "narrative" and that this narrative is us, our identities ... for







each of us is a biography, a story.<sup>2</sup> In his work Marti plays with the ever-blurring distinctions between autobiography and memoir, fiction and non-fiction. In conversation he has noted the work of filmmaker Frederick Wiseman, who observed of his medium:

*A documentary is another form of fiction. It is arbitrary ... made up. It does not follow the natural order. Its major sequences are shorter than they are in real time. They acquire meaning they wouldn't have in isolation. What is magical about a good film is magical about a good play or a good novel.<sup>3</sup>*

With that said, Marti is engaged in an important project, namely the depiction of people as sexual beings and without the fear and secrecy that once inhibited this discourse. The libido, as the surrealists noted, is the most powerful force in the world. It is both the wellspring of the imagination and outside of the law.

Marti's portrait of Peter Fay, *Bacon's dog*, takes us on a journey through a relationship between these two men which is beautifully described in voice-over by Fay as 'a new music' where 'the lamb lay down with the lions'. Voice-overs by the subject and artist as well as actual dialogue continue throughout the piece. At the heart of this work and indeed all subjectivity is the manifestation and expression of sexuality.

In traditional portraiture coded sexual references were made through the depiction of clothing, pose, accoutrements or particular settings. Here everything is revealed. The piece opens with a blackened screen as a breathy whisper mysteriously intones: 'that's the work ... that's the work.' The splayed figure of an older naked man appears before quickly shifting to close-up views of different body parts: nipples, hands, chests, hair and fabric. The panoramic split-screen format compresses the images to add a level of confusion to the unexpected intimacy of the content. Poetic and ecstatic elements are in contrast to the ambient sounds of suburbia

and odd glimpses of domestic chaos such as a day bed with its crumpled sheets.

Unlike the representation of older men throughout art history (distant kings, philosophers, saints and prophets, world-weary and scarred warriors or fools), in *Bacon's dog* the main subject is active and desiring, not lacking and sexless, and overflowing with sensation. Fay is at once vulnerable and tender, manly and strong, mature as well as child-like, wearing a checked shirt, shorts and sandals. What gives this work power is that in the relations between maker and subject, empathy and objectivity are not mutually exclusive. As viewers we are more than prurient voyeurs of post-coital pillow talk. We are witness to a self-conscious performance and affirmation of identity, to new representations of masculinity and the aged body. This work counters the insistent erasure enforced on older people by youth culture. The totality of *Bacon's dog* is an incredibly moving and courageous gift to audiences by the subject and the artist.

- 1 *Bacon's dog* was first shown at BREENSPACE, Sydney, 16 July – 14 August 2010; more recently the work was included in 'Social Documents: The Ethics of Encounter Part 2' at Stills Gallery: Scotland's Centre for Photography, Edinburgh, 11 December 2010 – 6 March 2011.
- 2 Oliver Sacks, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*, Summit, New York, 1985.
- 3 Frederick Wiseman, in a television interview with David Stewart, PBS, 1998.

opposite, top to bottom  
*Bacon's dog*, 2010

Video stills, 2-channel HD video, 11 mins 30 secs duration  
Courtesy the artist and BREENSPACE, Sydney

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*Bacon's dog*, 2010

Production still, 2-channel HD video, 11 mins 30 secs duration  
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