

lower your ears

Lower your ears is a 'saying' that I have to admit, I had not heard before. Pertaining to the need for a haircut, this turn of phrase makes a direct comment upon how we appear to others. Georgia Metaxas in this new body of works uses the saying 'lower your ears' with a certain resonance in relation to the genre of photographic portraiture. Through the scrutiny of the camera lens, the tightly framed composition of the visual plane and the innate curiosity humanity holds for us all, Metaxas's eloquent series of portraits convey self-assured subjects with a hint of the expectation and nervousness that many of us feel when having our hair cut in public places, such as hair salons, and barber shops— not to mention when facing the camera.

The ritual of a haircut is the common link between each of these sitters. Metaxas approached the St Mary's House of Welcome in inner city Melbourne where she knew a haircutting session took place each month. Over a period of months the images were gathered with the permission of each of the subjects. In this project Metaxas documented the process of a haircut, from when the person first sat down with the black cape draped across their shoulders through the haircut itself, until the completion of the cut. This exhibition is the first body of work to be drawn from her source material.

In capturing the haircut process Metaxas is taking us on a visual rite of passage in which we see the transformation of a person taking place. What she has so expressively caught on film, I suggest are potentially semi-private moments of the haircutting process. The subjects demonstrate generosity in allowing the photographer to capture their seeming vulnerability. It is the poignancy of their bravery in giving Metaxas the opportunity to document their haircut that gives this series such visual punch.

Metaxas chooses not to show us the neat and tidy finished haircut photographs, but opts instead to convey the idiosyncratic gestures of the person during the haircut. We see one woman in the act of combing her hair before the haircut has commenced, another fellow grimaces as fine hairs tickle down the front of his face, others stare blindly into the lens almost challenging the viewer to make a comment about their new look in the making... one chap pulls away to the right, another looks to the floor not wanting to acknowledge his makeover. In the context of an exhibition these images identify personal traits that allow the viewer to hypothesize about who they are, and what sort of haircut they might be having. In doing this we become immersed in the language of the haircut further anchoring our awareness of the ritual; short back and sides, a little of the top, layered all over...

In their entirety these images force us as outsiders to stop and look at a moment in time during a haircut. They warrant direct interaction that goes beyond a mere glance. In keeping her visual structure tight Metaxas allows us to engage in the vast array of emotive experiences a haircut can conjure. These feelings along with the consistent framing and the use of focused lighting on each person's face remind us yet again of the social currency images of people have in contemporary society.

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Lisa Byrne is an independent writer and curator currently based in Melbourne.