

The Mourners

There is a seriousness of intent in Georgia Metaxas's series *The Mourners*, both on the part of the photographer and the individual subjects. Those who have been photographed have made a singular decision – in memory of a loved one, they have chosen to wear black for the rest of their lives. The four photographs presented in this installation at the CCP are part of a larger series of thirteen portraits of mourners.

In Metaxas's work to date the relationship between the traditions of documentary and staged photography is pivotal. The impulse for *The Mourners* can be described as documentary, providing evidence of a ritual that has had little exposure in the wider Australian community. The process Metaxas has followed to locate her subjects also conforms to a particular stream of documentary practice; it is systematic and structured. There is nothing random or spontaneous about the selection of mourners. They have been identified through Metaxas's approaches to community, church and other groups in Melbourne. This process introduces a certain level of formality and the crucial element of consent.

While the series is documentary in some key respects, the photographs are also clearly constructions that are indebted not only to painted portraits but to photographic studio portraiture as well. Metaxas has explained that for each session she assembled 'a portable studio, consisting of a black velvet backdrop, a diffused studio light and a small adjustable stool'. At its simplest, this arrangement assures the desired consistency across the individual photographs that make up the series. However, Metaxas's staging does more than this. Crucially it achieves an apparently contradictory result between the impersonal and personal. On one hand, the backdrop masks any environmental detail that would anchor the subject within their own environment (a nursing home, community centre or church group). On the other hand, the elimination of external information serves to focus attention on each sitter, on their clearly lit face above all else, and on their black clothing, which in some instances includes head scarves.

The 'coolness' of the portraits also arises from Metaxas's use of the averted gaze. No mourners directly address the viewer. Instead they look out of the frame, and in one case, a woman has closed her eyes. This absence of eye contact reinforces the fact that Metaxas's subjects have chosen to remove themselves from the conventions of societal display and conspicuous consumption, in relation to dress, jewellery and accessories. They have abandoned the use of colour and surface distraction, thus underlining their preoccupation with inner states of being and the act of mourning as a private and perpetual act.

Metaxas has stated that her primary interest in *The Mourners* is with ritual and its manifestations rather than with the individual as such. She therefore does not provide details about any subjects' circumstances, whether they are mourning the death of a husband, sibling or a child; whether their choices have been made for cultural, religious or personal reasons; whether they are of Greek, Maltese, Italian or Iraqi origin. But she

uses the fidelity of photography to convey precise, detailed information about the facial features of each mourner and the qualities of their skin.

The portraits Metaxas has created in collaboration with her subjects are preternaturally still. The unnamed and unknown mourners occupy their shared, featureless pictorial space with dignity and gravitas. They also have in common their resoluteness, their private intent. The mourners can be scrutinised by the viewer but they are not revealed.

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