

The work of Ben Aitken is both photographic and about as far from photography as image making can get. This contradiction is inherent, to some degree, in all representative painting made since photography began but it is taken to an extreme in Aitken's work. The canvas is attacked with drips, splatters, smears and frantic brushwork. Yet the paint is applied to accurate drawing. This contradictory doubling of the work is restated at other levels. The images sit on flat monochrome canvases, the smooth, impersonal coloured surface at odds with the images that they host. Sometimes the image itself is literally doubled, as with a multiple exposure photograph. And since we are dealing with paintings that clearly represent particular individuals, it is strongly suggested that people themselves are doubled and contradictory.

The format of Aitken's paintings – a shot of the torso, presented frontally and centred in the canvas is typical of the composition of amateur photography. However the continual production, reproduction and dissemination of images are changing society and individuals. It is still very early to say exactly what these changes are and what the long-term impact will be. Aitken's paintings seem to suggest that the early evidence is conflicting. Any single image of a person says little beyond the particular way light has been reflected off them during the brief interval in which the photograph was made. The proliferation of photographs of a person forms a record of their actions. The collection of photographs reveals where a person was, whom they were with and sometimes what they were doing. The relentless self-examination and the sharing of this examination is a motivator for ethical behaviour and action. On the other hand, the endless publication of lives encourages a narcissism. Social interactions are reduced to an opportunity to collect appreciation, a tendency encouraged by the handy measuring of endorsements on social media

Aitken's works are not photographs. As Barthes points out, photographs lacking marks or signs are rendered invisible "this is me" rather than "this is a picture of me"<sup>1</sup> Aitken's paintings are certainly pictures of people. They draw on and invoke aspects of photography, but they are made from paint and sit in the deep tradition of painting. Time operates differently in a painting. A painting is an index of the labour of the painter. The passing of time may be represented in a painting, as with Aitken's double exposure style paintings, or the painting can make a timeless image. In many of Aitken's paintings no time passes. The figure is emblematic, taken outside of time and out of the network of interactions and connections, which construct identity, a point emphasised by the way the figures float on the canvas, a clear division between the smooth underpainting and the expressive gestural mark making.

In many of these paintings the flesh seems almost to be melting from the face. As though the individuals are dissolving under the glare of continued scrutiny by others or themselves. The faces are bruised, perhaps injured by their encounter with representation but still willing to fight for existence.

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<sup>1</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 1980

