

Nigel Grimmer: This is not what you're looking for

Keys and Red Herrings



Words: Michael Eden

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Nigel Grimmer works in photography and sculpture (*assemblage* in the Dada sense may be a more accurate description) to explore identity, glamour, kitsch and authenticity. Immediate qualities in the presentation which come through at first are defined by references to nostalgia, camp and kitsch, as well as a strong sense of irony, and the use of and exposition of media stereotypes. If this draws you in or impacts, then the subtle nuances of crisis, societal expectation, introspection and critique are there to add depth to the practice.

His works are at once personal; drawing on himself, friends and family for subject matter, while also finding strategies from this to explore broader issues: the public and the private, the forces of popular culture and the ever deferred, never quite pinned down, notion of a self. To understand Grimmer's take on portraiture and to respect his own insistence on cataloguing, it is useful to consider some of his themes as they play out across his practice, itself one large interrelated whole.

Buddies, Berlin (1999), a series which comprises the variations *Cowboys*, *Cops* and *Footballers* is an early foray into masculinity and performance, drawing on the repeated motif of the toy as conveyer of meaning. Background, too, plays an important role. The city, in this case the German capital, seems appropriately to scale at first glance, then falls away and undercuts the tragic or violent narratives; these are small, peripheral people made large, almost unreal and idealised, yet still individuals and couples.

Bender (2001) continues this theme (use of toys) with what appears to be *The Creature from the Black Lagoon* (1950s pulp horror) interacting with saccharine pink princesses. Paranoia about political and gender leanings contrasted with the Disney-esque idealism of the princesses and their possible corruption is drawn through scenarios that might have been arranged by a child. The notion of play as a place of resistance and experimentation is implied in the artist's various uses of

childlike objects and playfulness. These qualities, and the use of irony, feature in Grimmer's portraiture in general.

Places I Call Home (2005) draws on narrative ambiguity more directly; the titles offer keys and red herrings while the combination of real environments and fake subjects again asks the viewer to analyse as well as enjoy the visual language they are presented with. These scenarios draw on filmic clichés of beginnings and endings, poignant moments and distortions of scale. Grimmer invites projection into his highly controlled set-ups, saving his work from becoming overdetermined.

Annihilation by Blandness (2005) appears to play up the notion of the collection and a strange form of stasis represented by the clothes covering the hyper-individualised figures which form somewhat disturbing families. People (represented by various types of action figure) who don't seem to belong together are posed in what is immediately read as a family portrait, waiting for the camera to reinforce their tenuous bond. Allusions to the psychodrama of domesticity hardly need pointing out, while the lack of a collective or hegemonic set of values to fully suture 'the family' is a more subtle aspect of this work. We are left wondering if the exaggerated

figures represent the societal designations of mother, father and child... or the narcissistic modern subject.

Roadkill Family Album (2000-present) sees the artist, his family and friends posing by roadsides, seemingly killed by passing traffic but without any visible injury; thus drawing attention to the constructed nature of the image and the cooperation of the performing subject. This quality is further emphasised by strangely cathartic animal masks obscuring the named subject; *Jo, Hull* (2000) or *Mum, Fritton* (2000) for example. The matter-of-fact titling adds a deadpan and unsentimental overtone akin to pathologists', or psychopaths' categorisations of what is normally a highly emotionalised image: the holiday snap.

The masks have various resonances, such as childhood games, adult fetish, and there is something of *The Wicker Man* (1973), especially since we know the subject is playing dead and inviting the viewer's projections. What is enjoyable about these works is the way they bring macabre marginalia into central focus; dead wildlife, as seen from the corner of the eye when travelling to holiday destinations, conflating it with normally comforting designations of mum, dad or a friend's name. The images contain violence, but heavily censored and controlled,



Above: *Nigel Doll (Paris 2011)*
Previous: *Roadkill Family Album (Mum, Acle, 2000)*

which adds to an off-kilter feeling. These works act as strange memento mori which undercut the notion of free time with reminders of stagnation, perpetual performance and death. The holiday then, a space for relaxation and renewal, becomes a kind of dangerous trap where certain people are impassively held prisoner. The images are not depressing though and, as the *Guardian's* Robert Clark observes, "Grimmer is good at pop pathos", mixing enough irony, nostalgia and kitsch to sugar-coat observations about identity, homosexuality and family dynamics to keep his work from overloading the viewer with dour inflections.

A similar strategy is employed in another ongoing project, *Art Drag Album* where the line between glamour and pop fashion is explored in relation to self-portraiture and used to satirise and explore media stereotypes and identity. *Nigel as General Idea's Nazi Milk* or *Nigel as Miss Wong* both see the artist's face and shoulders obscured consecutively by the contrasting images of, firstly: an art collective's controversial image that explores 'the conflicting forces of innocence and evil' (Sarah E.K. Smith) and, subsequently, Miss Wong, a variant on the theme of the better-known (The) Chinese Girl. (That work, by Vladimir Tretchikoff, is also known as the famous 'green lady' and adorned many households in the '50s, '60s and early '70s.



*Analogue Disruptions
(Adam 2019)*

Tretchikoff is considered a kitsch master and has, oddly, been compared to both Van Gogh and Warhol.) This ongoing series which consists of 12 works (11 of which are self-portraits) presents identity as an unknowable hall of mirrors where individuals deflect attention by assuming guises. Or are they living through the assumed qualities of another? The camp attraction of the chosen imagery seems also to speak to debates around taste and authenticity; the photographs are posed, compositions thought through, and the message is nuanced. All of which alludes to high art, while much of the imagery and found objects used are pop and, so-called, low cultural references.

These obsessions are reformed adapted and reconsidered in a furious outpouring of ongoing works which ambitiously record, catalogue and collect artefact after artefact in order to produce new works. Understanding some of these themes and how they speak to both the individual and the collective is a useful 'in' to this practice.

The Anti-Portrait Interview with Nigel Grimmer

I am a mixed media artist researching the language of the photographic portrait. Historically my investigation focused on domestic photography, specifically the family album. Recently I have begun to study the self-portraits produced for use within social media, particularly dating apps, Grindr and Instagram.

Investigating photographic language has necessitated a primarily lens-based practice, but I have at times exhibited sculpture, installation, printmaking and found objects.

I think of my work as anti-portraiture; the model's face is obscured in the majority of my photographs through a variety of devices. This methodology stems from a reaction against photographic history and traditional practice,

“ I THINK OF MY WORK AS ANTI-PORTRAITURE; THE MODEL'S FACE IS OBSCURED ”

which I see as exploitative and corrupt. Much of the history of photography is based around arguments over inventions, the patenting of various processes and is primarily technologically driven. There is then an underlying narrative of the exploitation of the other, the model and the unsuspecting public by the privileged. This is highlighted by Geoff Dyer in *The Ongoing Moment* in which he summarises the canonical photographers who have surreptitiously shot portraits of the blind; the “ultimate natural model”. My allegiance was always with the 'other', and never with the 'heroic' figure of the photographer. Beginning with my undergraduate studies I have looked at other ways of working, of turning the camera on myself, inspired greatly by Jo Spence. I am currently negotiating more social practices with my collaborators.

As a student, work like Richard Billingham *Ray's a Laugh* was very popular, but the reception of the work horrified me. Conversations I overheard amongst gallery visitors would relate

mainly to character assassinations of Billingham's parents over the merits or aims of the project or photographs. As my family were also my models, I wanted to introduce some kind of protective barrier between them and this audience.

Do you feel that photography has replaced (painted) portraiture?

Historically, photography freed painting from the need to represent or document, leading to abstraction and more diverse painting practices. Where painting traditionally documented the wealthy and the sacred, photography recorded both everything and nothing. There has been a continual back and forth of influences between painting and photography; a painted image might be cropped or blurred; a photograph may be abstracted. Currently I feel the influences for both the contemporary painting and photography I admire come

” MY ADULT FRIENDS WERE GIVEN COMMANDS TRADITIONALLY SHOUTED AT A NAUGHTY CHILD

from elsewhere; from technological advances and social media, for example.

What is the relationship between the subject and the painter/artist?

Within my initial practice the relationship between artist and subject was very literal, my models were my friends and family; they were asked to model for alternatives to the family photograph album. I wanted to see how long it would take for my friends to ask to be in my new albums as opposed to appearing in our traditional snapshots.

Later I used social media, particularly dating apps, to recruit models; my profiles asked for volunteers. This was the first time I photographed strangers in my practice. In these projects some kind of inherent intimacy is apparent between model and sitter. The photographs were shot in one of our homes, often in the bedroom; the *mise-en-scène* provided clues to the identity of the masked models. There are layers of both narcissism and desire within the images. In the project *Nigelacra*, models were photographed naked wearing a mask of my face. The anonymous nature of the project encouraged many of the models to participate, performing for the camera. When exhibited, the audience could physically move the images, choosing their favorites. Despite the models having identical faces, the audience continually ranked them in order of preference, replicating the dating app, complete with anonymous users and fragmented bodies.

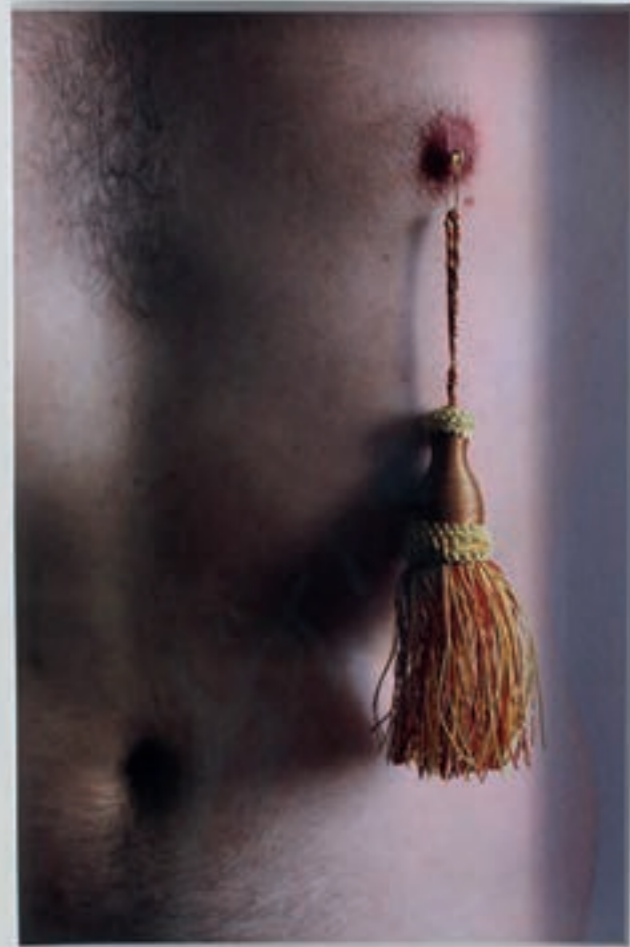
Within my practice the models help to shape the work; there is always a dialogue between the subject and photographer. The models can delete photos from the shoot they aren't happy with, they can bring props, outfits and accessories, or find locations they think relate to my practice.

Classically, a portrait also contains symbolic elements which allow the painter to creatively tell more of the subject's story. Is this still the case? Many contemporary artists include symbolic elements within their work, whether they think of their work as engaging with symbolism, conceptualism, semiotics or narrative. It's hard to think of an artist like Paula Rego, for example, not using symbolic elements in their practice.

Within my work the faces of the models are usually obscured, so I sometimes include clues within the frame as to their identity. In an old project called *The Dunces* my adult friends were given commands traditionally shouted at a naughty child. The models faced away from the camera, they stood in the corner; it was important that they were photographed in their own bedrooms to give the viewer clues to read.

Within my latest project *Analogue Disruptions* the symbolic elements relate more to social media, the language of selfies and Instagram stories. The models are mainly volunteers from Instagram.

The photos appear to contain the digital disruptions that we are used to seeing within social media portraiture—scribbles and spots obscuring faces, things floating on the surface of the images, shattering the photographic illusion of three-dimensional space. However, there is no digital editing within the images, all the 'disruptions' are physical, analogue. The scribbles and spots are cut from wood, other disruptions are created using objects picked up around the model's home or purchased from Amazon. No editing or post-production of the image means that the model can see the final image during the shoot, and we can discuss which images we both deem successful and how we can progress.



AGAIN QUESTIONING WHETHER ” THE OBJECT OR THE PHOTOGRAPH IS THE FOCUS OF MY PRACTICE

Do you create other artistic work outside of portraits?

My degree was in sculpture, but even then I was producing sculpture about photography. Sometimes I built sculptures that documented an event missing from the family album. I would interview members of my family about the event; a three-dimensional rendering was then ideal for capturing the inherent dualities and layers of my family's recollections. Later I played with the relationship between photography and sculpture; I photographed objects I had made. Was the photograph documentation of a sculpture, or the sculpture a prop for a photograph?

My current project *Analogue Disruptions* considers the disrupted photographic image. For 190 years technological advances have refined photographic processes, diverting attention from the physicality of the print. Within this digital age our images now carry the scars of our technology. It is becoming increasingly difficult to look past the once invisible surface of the photograph, to enter the illusionary space of the image. The photographs we view on our mobile devices carry emojis or Snapchat filters that disregard the perspective of the image we view. These images are then layered on top of each other with clocks, icons, menus and dead pixels, further drawing our eye to the surface. Like vitreous floaters causing spots before our eyes, a mechanical process is revealed: the illusion is broken.

For this project I initially created props that either reflected or absorbed the light, appearing to create black or white holes in the surface of the photograph, drawing attention to the photographic surface. Then I created colourful wooden props that resembled patterns, marks or emojis indicative of the apps I was researching. When photographed

these props created the illusion of digital additions to the image, even in analogue photographs. Here the sculptural objects are solely created as photographic props.

Given my feelings towards much photographic practice, that it is inherently exploitative, I feel it is necessary to highlight the constructed nature of the photographic illusion whenever possible. We live in an age that consumes images in problematic ways; we are the first generation that understands that most images we see, the cover of a fashion magazine for example, are constructed or manipulated in some way, but we still diet to look like the image we know is fallacy.

Do portraits have to be of people?

If we look at the collected works of artists known for their self-portraits like Frida Kahlo or Cindy Sherman their non-figurative still lifes usually read equally as portraiture. Frida Kahlo's studies of fruit usually have her pets, locally sourced objects and slogans included in the scene. These paintings say as much about her politics and nationalism as her self-portraits say about her health and relationships. Sherman's photographs of prostheses also read as portraits, suggesting a fragmented, augmented, partly artificial body.

I created a fashion doll as a self-portrait. *Nigel Doll* is a 12-inch fashion doll who was produced in an edition of 20. The doll precedes selfie culture; he was taken on various trips around the world with me. When I was travelling alone he was held up in front of various landmarks; he was me by proxy. *Nigel Doll* has been exhibited as both a photographic project and as a sculptural object, again questioning whether the object or the photograph is the focus of my practice.

Many years' worth of photographs of *Nigel Doll* were exhibited together under the title *Time's Relentless Melt* at Charlie Dutton Gallery; this reference to Sontag recalls the idea that photographs reflect mortality and decay as they capture a moment that has now passed. Within the exhibition, however, it was impossible to put the photographs of the doll in any order as the doll always looked the same, despite the photographs being taken over the space of a decade.

“Any portrait is a self-portrait.” To what extent is that true and what does this say about portraiture?

Frida Kahlo and Cindy Sherman's still life works can easily be read as self-portraits in the way they sit within the artists' oeuvres. However, any work can be seen as a self-portrait in as much as it shows the decision-making process of the artist; why did this artist choose to make this work in this particular way? When art students worry that their ideas have been made before it should be pointed out that no one has realised that idea in the way they will.

What is the future of portraiture?

I feel that portraiture is often a very cyclical practice with different fashions coming and going and ideas being recycled. Technological advances make some impact on both the materials used and on content and suggest some kind of forward momentum. In photography for example, mobile phone technology has drastically changed what is photographed, and how and where these images are stored. Visually, filters, memes, selfies and profile photos constitute a brand-new language of portraiture which is relatively uncharted, ethically or aesthetically. Much of this language has consumed traditional domestic photography, so it naturally became subject matter for my practice.

I'm working on a new body of my *Analogue Disruptions* project, adding further disruptions to the works during the framing process, making each work unique. I've taken objects or fabrics that appear within the photograph, then produced fabric slipcases or embellishments that hide or obscure part of the framed work. The physicality of the 'real' object again highlights the flatness and constructed nature of the photograph.



Analogue Disruptions
(Charlie 2017)

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