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What is a photograph?
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In Jeff Wall's 1984 essay 'Unity and fragmentation in Manet', he sees the 19th-century French painter as historically trapped. He was forced to fulfil the role of the artist-hinge between the ruined 'concept of a picture', whose depleted notions of harmony and unity had been central to western art for centuries, and modernity with its accompanying notions of fragmentation, montage and abstraction.

This 'mortified concept of the picture' (as Wall puts it) sees its extreme, late 20th-century dissolution in exhibitions like 'What is a Photograph?' In examining the current state of a single kind of mediated object (the show, tellingly, is not entitled 'What is photography?' which would address process rather than the picture itself), the exhibition identifies and even encourages the photograph's extreme – yet happy – state of decay. Most viewers have already guessed the punch-line: surprise!

The photograph in these modern times is rarely an unmanipulated real or recognisable image imprinted onto light-sensitive paper. No, the photograph can be three-dimensional, a picture transferred onto a souvenir mug (Matt Mitchell, *Matt Mitchell's Tudor World*, 1998); manipulated so as to straddle photography and painting (Monika Oechsler's *Goshka and Matt*, 1998, an arresting, religious-looking double portrait); generated – in words rather than images – on a computer (co-curator Susan Morris's *Text*, 1997); an Op Art-like wavy black-and-white cibachrome printed on stainless steel (Helen Robertson's Monochrome I, 1996); or even dumb cute-cat snaps (Keith Arnatt, *Amy, Archie, Marmsy, Boot, Jones and Daisy*, a 1998 series of 80 slides). Straight, image-hungry photography (say, a work by Richard Billingham) would have looked distinctly out of place in this show which, moreover, was noticeably colourless.

So photography isn't necessarily a photograph any more, but nobody's jaw is going to drop at this bit of postmodern 'news' – so much for theory, in a way. The success of an exhibition like this, as usual, lies in the strength of the work on show, and the Five Years curating team of Morris, David Bate and Marc Hulson have to be credited for bringing together this very fresh-looking gathering of new London-based artists, but above all for bringing to the fore the one show-stopping piece on exhibition: a video animation called *Clay*, 1998, by Denise Webber.

Clay pretty much steals the show. Like the other works here, this piece is modest in scale, screened as it is on an average, medium-sized TV. Also like the other works, it is not meant to baffle the viewer into puzzling over how it was made. Webber has quite simply strung together consecutive series of stills from Eadweard Muybridge's all-too-famous studies of human locomotion, restoring time and space to these pre-cinematic sequences. This simple operation, which has seemingly been begging to be done for over a

century in some form more gratifying than a home-made flipbook, is the single, formidable idea behind *Clay*.

Like Frankenstein, these dead fragments are pieced together into something weirdly alive, forced back into life from the annals of photographic history and transformed into breathing, smirking, moving beings. The results are extraordinary.

Webber has selected some lesser-known Muybridge photographs, which make this video all the more unexpected. Suddenly the figures turn from being mere case studies into thinking, smiling, erotic beings. A man, dressed in his underwear, incongruously handling a bayonet, is seen to break into an amused smile, perhaps responding to the ludicrousness of the set-up. It's not that the scene turns comical; rather the armed, semi-naked soldier regains his dignity, demonstrates his understanding of his awkward position, his good-natured accusation of the photographer's demands upon him. In revealing this and so many other barely perceptible gestures, Webber collapses the alleged objectivity of Muybridge's project more effectively and pleasurably than a hundred cultural theorists just talking about it.

These naked stills have always looked erotic; in motion, they are borderline pornographic. You see Muybridge dwell on a bouncing buttock, a flapping tit, and the eroticism of this observing, probing man photographing a compliant naked woman in some isolated courtyard is overwhelming. Jeff Wall, in analysing the traditional painted picture, claimed that 'the painted body is the simultaneous trace of two bodies' (the painter and his model), and as such is inherently erotic. With Muybridge, and Webber's re-animation of his work in *Clay*, we see that this tactile eroticism was obviously still thriving at the dawn of modernity in these blatantly voyeuristic studies of the human (and nakedly animalesque) body.

Above all it is the women in these pictures who are allowed to shed their undignified anonymity and shine gloriously. Probably the most unforgettable sequence is one fabulously sexy Victorian woman, naked as usual, lounging brazenly under the overexposed sun, taking a deep, pleasurable puff of a cigarette and then stretching out her arm in triumphant, joyous abandon. The relaxed fluidity of her motion, her lack of embarrassment at being naked, her pre-suffragette feminism, are all delightful in a way that Muybridge's mummified women had never been in the stills.

Webber's chosen soundtrack of ringing bells – a timeless sort of sound and, as the artist points out, a sound that is public, like the bodies on display – all enhance the sense of celebration in the belated resurrection of these ghosts, who, until now, seemed only the victims of voyeurism, art history and mean 19th-century science. *Clay* is, in many ways, truly liberating.

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