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Representation without limits

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Representation has no limits because human beings cannot be contained by one image or one rule; art history is a history of resistance to stasis. Representation is restless, more about possibility than fixity; it's a work-in-progress, constantly re-thought and replaced; stretched to breaking point until it assumes a new shape, adapting to the time, place and culture it finds itself in. Despite the intensity of the attention it's had, no one has ever been able to say – and why would they? – "this is it. Representation has reached its limits". You might as well say human beings have reached their limits.
When we ask if we can really see each other, we have to address who 'we' is.
What photography is – its role, its responsibility, its failures and strengths, its power as a truth teller and its ready distortion of reality – is as complicated as defining who 'we' are.
A photograph can be a record, a clue, a memento, a lie, a memory, an injunction to forget or a memorial.
A photograph can be a form of correction, a re-telling, a re-looking.
A photograph is like the Russian saying: "He lied like an eye witness".
A photograph is utterly human in that it can be endlessly manipulated.
A photograph is all about exposure, even as it holds its secrets tight.
A photograph can be critical, sentimental, evasive. It can be large or small, projected in a dark room or printed on paper or rock. It is at once a material, a medium and a kind of haunting: the proof that something existed someplace else: somewhere that isn't here or now.
The meaning of a photograph is never singular: it's often as multi-layered and as mysterious to the artist as it is to the person looking at it.
A photograph is a story that refuses to reveal its conclusion – or its beginning.

A camera is at once an object, a subject and a metaphor. It can be a pin prick in a cardboard box or an intricate mass of wires and lenses that costs a small fortune to produce and buy.
A camera is merely a conduit, the car on the road to the image.

A photograph can be both idiosyncratic and yet also reflect on the human condition. Nothing is duller than an image you can understand immediately; didacticism is the enemy of art.
This is not, by a long way, the case in Elisa Sighicelli's photographs; they reward endless looking and even then they resist reduction. They reflect the physical world even as they pay homage to abstraction.
These are images to live with; images to eavesdrop on, to absorb, to mull over. They invite you in and then leave you to your own devices.

Some of the photographs depict sculptures in the collection of the Archaeological Museum in Naples. Many of these carvings are based on stories from mythology, many of which, of course, concern episodes of terrible brutality: rape, murder, torture. But here, the cruelty is cropped out and replaced with something more vulnerable; the tenderness of a belly, an expressive hand, a soft thigh; one person touching another, gently. The photographs are printed on marble: the image replicates the object. This is photography as a hall of mirrors; history reflected back on itself, in fragments: the photograph transformed into a sculpture itself.

These are photographs of mirrors and glasses and carriage lights; objects that contain and then reflect light, liquid, loss... Fragile, translucent objects, worn down by time, endlessly reflected, distorted and then, impossibly, made new. The genre of still life is one that understands that an object is more than the sum of its parts: nothing is quite what it seems, because the so-called real world is ripe for symbolism: a love story contained in a glass of wine, the soft glow of a carriage light on a dark night, the intimation of a face at twilight. The blue of the Bay of Naples, distant, shimmering, is echoed in the soft blue of a Murano glass, once filled with cold wine and touched by the lips of a long-dead aristocrat.

To create photographs of mirrors alongside images of sculptural fragments from history, printed on the very material that is being represented, is to create something that is at once dizzyingly self-referential and utterly brand new. The image has become the thing it is echoing – and in the process it is re-born.

Gianluigi mentioned Emily Dickinson's *Bee Poem* in an email to me, discussing her work. But looking at Elisa Sighicelli's photographs makes me think
of another of her great observations:

One need not be a chamber to be haunted
One need not be a house;
The brain has corridors surpassing
Material place

Far safer, of a midnight meeting
External ghost
Than an interior confronting
That whiter host

Far safer through an Abbey gallop
The stones achase
Than, moonless, one's own self encounter
In lonesome place

Ourself behind ourself concealed
Should startle most;
Assassin, hid in our apartment,
Be horror's least.

In other words: we haunt ourselves, but objects, too, are usually more than the sum of their parts.
In the historian Mary Beard's fascinating history of *The Parthenon* (2002) she discusses the impossibility of consensus about the meaning of the many sculptures and fragments that remain from the building, and their wider cultural and symbolic functions. She has studied the art of classical Greece and Rome for decades but stresses that no one can really know the motivations of a sculptor from thousands of years ago. We are like astronauts attempting to understand planets we have never visited.
Mary Beard suggests that all we can do is absorb what is known of these sculptures and then speculate.

An image can be as efficient a speculator as a sentence. A life is not that dissimilar to a broken sculpture.
We live in stops and starts, in half-forgotten conversa- tions and furious misnomers.
In actions that mutate in memory.
In the residue of deep emotional entanglements.

In absence.
In fragments.
I remember a hand drifting over my own.
I remember a leg, crossed in a café; a face softened with the smoke of a cigarette.
I remember shouting but I do not remember why.
I remember an imprint of flesh on flesh.
I remember the shape of my horse's ears; the silky belly of a beloved dog. A flower, soon to perish.
The gnarled, beautiful hand of my father, gripping mine. A sculpture of someone else, softened in time. The marble flesh a reminder of the flesh of someone living, some beloved, someone lost.
How could a historian know all of this?

A visitor to any museum is required to grapple with a staggering amount of objects and information, much of it incomplete, while simultaneously wrestling with the facts and fallacies of history and memory.

History is always, in a sense, contemporary.

This is an exhibition filled with reflective surfaces: glass, metal, mirrors; halls of mirrors, worlds within worlds within worlds.

In this self-obsessed age, the age of selfie sticks and a thousand self-portraits a day, it is difficult for us to imagine a time in which a face was unknown to the person inhabiting it. For much of history, people did not know what they looked like.

Mirrors as we know them are a relatively modern invention; until the mid-19th century, they were a luxury item. The earliest mirrors, which are from Egypt and surrounding areas, date from around 3000 BCE. They are made from highly polished volcanic glass obsidian: looking into one is like gazing into a pool of black water; the face a moving target. As the tale of Narcissus looking at his own reflection in a pool attests to, liquid is the first mirror. The mirror is a hasty judge. Mirrors are magical objects: they shift focus with every breath.

In Britain's Iron Age mirrors were made from bronze and iron – reflection pulled from the earth and transmuted by a kind of alchemy. When glass-blowing was invented in the

14th century, hand-held convex mirrors became popular with artists, who used them for self-portraits; but even then, they were rare, expensive, luxurious.

Artists have long been fascinated by mirrors as both symbols – portals to other states of being – and as echoes of paintings – another form of representation. In the renaissance, mirrors, were made from a com- bination of glass, tin and mercury; the first known oil painting featuring a mirror – and arguably the most famous – is Jan van Eyck's *Arnolfini Portrait* from 1434; is the tiny portrait of the man in the mirror the artist himself? In the 16th century, Venice, long known for its glassware, became the centre for mirror manu- facture. Vasari discusses self-portraits painted "alla sphera" and "allo specchio". It wasn't until 1835 that a German chemist named Justus von Liebig invented a process that allowed, for the first time, mirrors to be mass-produced. We can only imagine the collective shock this must have engendered...

That mirrors are everywhere now – not only as objects on the wall but as digital files – has become a burden; we are, it would seem, at once utterly bored by and yet obsessed with the contours of our own faces.

The mirrors in Elisa Sighicelli's photographs are both images of the present and a dreamy glimpse into the past; tears, if you will, in the fabric of time. They are aged with the patina of very old air; sunlight ripples likes water on a hot day across their still surfaces. They are like portals to the past but reflect this moment now, in all of its fragmentary glory and pain. The mirror pretends to be objective, but it's always betrayed by history, another imposter. History is not carved in stone. It never was.

Fernando Pessoa wrote: "The inventor of the mirror poisoned the human heart". Jean Cocteau wrote: "The mirror should think longer before it reflects".
In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf wrote – as if she had seen Elisa Sighicelli's photographs – "Whatever may be their use in civilised societies, mirrors are essential to all violent and heroic action".
It's not surprising that Sigmund Freud was a great collector of mirrors. As psychoanalysis has made so clear, human beings move through life, dictated to by a mess of conscious and unconscious memories, acts and feelings. The language of photography, of art, is a reflection of this: it's one of slippages and contradictions that are communicated via images, which are, by their very nature, indeterminate. A crystal glass, for example, might have a very specific meaning for an artist, and a very

different one to the person looking at it 300 years via a medium that was not yet invented when the glass was in use.

Elisa Sighicelli has said: "In a contemporary world of virtual images, I am interested in restoring the composite tactility of images and their tangibility in a real space".

The image becomes the thing it is representing.

Printed on glass
Printed on satin
Printed on travertine stone

Flesh in these images is as fragile as glass; as tough as stone; crafted in light.
Archaeology is a digging deep, both literally and figuratively.
Dust is a kind of polish.
Distortion, blurring, a lack of focus: the photographs move between a crystal clarity and an elusive landscape. The image itself is evasive: focus is pulled.
Again: how human.

There is no single narrative here, but these are images that lend themselves to stories.
Who has just left the room? Why did they leave?
Did the man survive being swallowed by a sea monster? Did she want to be touched?
Who lived there? Who held that? Who moved that? Who decided that this story was the one that needed to be told? Is this swirl of bodies a dream, an orgy, a battle? Did anyone survive? Are ghosts humans of our own making?

35 images of objects that are at once elusive and immortal, filtered and captured with light.
35 images of objects, each and every one more than the material that defines them.
35 images that defy the idea of limiting anything.

Untitled (9386), 2018