ANNE COLVIN: SHOW YOUR FACE; TART CONTEMPORARY • SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA

Anna Colvin’s photographs convey uneasy states of mind that are, nonetheless, easily recognizable. Her subjects appear nearly infantile in their vulnerability. Curled up like snails in the fetal position or swinging at the air with clenched jaw and fists, they inspire the viewer to look on with feelings of empathy. Perhaps our ability to identify with these emotions has something to do with how unguarded her subjects seem. They don’t hold back their emotions, but freely indulge raw sentiments; they act out and thereby exercise what appears to be deeply buried hang-ups or fears.

One image comprising the series, “Leave Me Alone,” shows an elderly gentleman caught in the midst of an anger fit. He could be lashing out at the world because he’s unable to cope with signs of his advancing age and the fragility that they portend. In another photo, a woman, around the same age, looks completely withdrawn, as though she has resigned against efforts to communicate with those around her, as if she is seeking solace in an alternate inner reality. Colvin isn’t interested in capturing individual personality flaws here. Rather, her subjects lend form to core emotions that belong to everyone, emotions that may or may not have been stunted during early stages of our development. It’s as though she has traced certain behaviors directly back to the roots of the id. She may be making the case that no matter how much we try to suppress our outbursts and temptations, trying to cover them with expertly versed social graces or calculated coping mechanisms, they succeed in making an ungainly appearance during moments of strife or stress.

If the first series of photographs are confrontational, the subjects holding the viewer at a distance with their defiant poses, the second series invites a closer read. Colvin’s choice of materials, digital prints on plotter paper, coupled with the prints’ design and layout, gives these images a more informal appearance. Meant to be read as diary entries or dispatches sent via fax or email, they report on the mental and physical condition of the pictured subject, a man named John. Overall, his outlook seems bleak. One dispatch reports, “John feels lost,” and shows the protagonist looking morose as he seeks shelter under a cocoon-like comforter. His photo is paired with a smaller image of a compass symbolizing his distress. These portraits are so expressive in and of themselves, that the commentary explaining John’s moods becomes extraneous. Colvin may have offered a less simplistic analysis and a more symbolic read had she omitted the text and displayed the portraits with just the survival gear—a band aid, a compass, a stick of lip balm, bungee cords—offered up as cures for John’s various ills.

Colvin’s choice of title for this series, “I Told You I Was Ill,” takes its cue from British comedian Spike Milligan, who suffered from clinical depression. Forever the dark humorist, Milligan had these words engraved on his tombstone. Such a reference lends the studies a somber cast, and it becomes harder to dismiss the alienation, estrangement and depression they convey as mere temporary ailments.

These studies’ clinical treatment encourages us to read the C-prints in “Leave Me Alone” differently as well. The photos take on the look of behavioral studies rather than character sketches. Had Colvin pictured her subjects conveying greater ranges of emotions, showing them in more joyous or hopeful moments for example, the images may have read as more comprehensive and multi-faceted studies. These milder states of mind may have also allowed a more accessible point of entry for the viewer. As it stands, however, the anguish states of Colvin’s subjects offer an acute reminder of the volatility of our own psychological and physiological well-being.

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