

Excerpt from:

Uncanny: Darren Siwes's Just Is series of photographs
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Siwes's neo-classicism extends to the more esoteric symbolism in his work. Deeply interested in the mystical ratios of ancient Greek thought (e.g. the golden mean) and the legacy of Platonic thought in the racism that informed Australia's coming into being, Siwes discovered the same legacy in European thinking and society during his recent study there. Plato's footprints were all over the place; and his relentless march down the ages echoed all the way to the Antipodes. Plato's artless Republic, a Utopian society of hierarchy and sameness that inspired neo-classical thought of the nineteenth century, is directly referred to in the masks worn by the models in Siwes's photographs. Plato proposed three classes or orders: gold (philosophers, priests, kings), silver (aristocracy and military), and bronze (workers and peasants), and warned against the mixing of these orders. That we can't tell if the masks are gold, silver or bronze is enough to tell us that Siwes's neo-classicism and devotion to 'history painting', is deeply ambivalent. It at once displays an authentic historical consciousness and an ironic attitude towards its lessons. Like Bennett, Siwes uses 'history' against itself; his images deconstruct the historical triumphs of colonialism.

Siwes's obsession with the turn of the previous century (one of his photographs is titled '1901') is not difficult to locate. It is the moment of Australia's Federation, when the White Australia policy became law and South Australian Aborigines lost whatever rights they still had. Siwes's work to date, and in particular this body of work, can be considered an interrogation of this historical moment, as if by imagining himself there he might understand its legacy in his own life. In a sense his photographs are self-portraits – he is the suited standing man in all the images. However they tell us little about the man Darren Siwes. As 'history paintings' these are not about individuals but about wider and more universal forces that comprise the ancient genre of tragedy from which 'history painting' derives. Siwes might be the model of this suited man standing erect, but no matter how strongly we may recognize his Aboriginal features in some of the images, it is an image of anonymity – much like Bennett's alter-ego John Citizen.

More correctly, this image of a suited man vainly seeks anonymity. Whatever Australia's multicultural ideal, a person with Siwes's facial features (that figure so prominently in his photographs) cannot, in Australia, escape their Aboriginality. Thus the burden of history Siwes bears, and the uncanny quality of his figure, as if it stands sentinel like for some loss that cannot be recovered. Unlike most of us, Siwes cannot be anonymous, cannot be invisible. He can never feel at home here, in Australia, as if he is the medium of troubled spirits.

Siwes's desire to feel what it is like to be a white Australian, to be invisible for a while, was an important part of his attraction to living in England. This is why he depicts himself in the background of the photographs taken in England, while in the Australian images he is thrust in the foreground. However Siwes found nowhere to hide in Europe. Like other Aboriginal artists who have spent some time there, he was frequently (mis)taken to be of Middle-Eastern origin. For some otherness is difficult to escape no matter where they are. This is because the same alienating relations of otherness are now ubiquitous across the globe. This exhibition of alternating images from England and Australia tellingly shows how similar the two places are, how even one hundred years ago a white mythology had already spread across the globe.