

Dryden Goodwin: Cast

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For images go to artists website at: <http://www.drydengoodwin.com/>

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The title of this book, *Cast*, has over forty associated meanings, from casting a line to casting a shadow, from casting a film role to casting a sculpture, from casting suspicion to casting a spell. All Dryden Goodwin's titles tend to have this plurality of potential readings, a plurality and ambiguity that draws from and echoes back into his work. The first work you see in this book is *State-City* (2004), a series of etchings of the London skyline. At first it is easy to assume that the title refers to the institutions of power the image seems to portray. However for me it refers more to the constitution of something, be it a liquid, solid or gas. In this work the city itself seems to almost dissolve or shimmer in front of our eyes, it moves from being a static image of a solid thing to something fluid and in transition, in a constantly changing state more akin to the vibrant, living and breathing and continually evolving nature of our cities themselves.

In many ways this portrayal of the city is analogous to Goodwin's methodology as an artist, which is shaped by his desire not to pin things down but instead to capture and present constant flux. One way he does this, and has always done this, is by the combining and interweaving of various media. Rather than simply take a photograph he will then draw over its surface, for example, as he does in his two series *Cradle* and *Caul*. Or, in another work, *Casting*, he juxtaposes photographs of scenes with drawings he has made from them, picking out faces and characters and then suggesting, through repeated drawing and re-drawing, his extended process of looking and observing. And his recent work *Shopshifter* takes this fascination with flux and change to an extreme, the work comprising nearly seven hundred small and rapidly made sketches (drawn from direct observation) of fellow passengers on trains and buses, which he shows separately but also amalgamates into one moving image work, where all the individual portraits merge uncannily into one composite face.

Importantly, this mixing of media and methods is a cross fertilisation, and perhaps a cross contamination, that infers the inadequacies of a single image or process. Drawing as an intervention into a photograph, for example, is a way to literally get into the surface of an image, to expand it beyond the constraints of its two-dimensionality in order to explore a 'third space' of the picture plane. It is a process that also suggests an attempt to reach back to the original space of the photographic encounter, the moment of exposure, and to make a connection between representation and the real. The animation work *Rock* is a prime example of this. The moving image usually encourages us to enter its illusory world but this is an experience that Goodwin's films never fully allow. In this new piece he plays and replays a sequence of drawings that pivot around in a way that disorientates the viewer. Rather than follow sequential time frames this piece holds us in stasis, both moving forward and back, so that it is impossible for the viewer not to be aware of the construction of the work. We are drawn in yet pushed away, constantly held on the cusp of the illusory space.

Made in London's commercial heart, on or near Oxford and Regent Street, these new pieces, like most of Goodwin's work, are firmly rooted in the contemporary urban

experience. Those of us familiar with these areas might even catch recognisable glimpses of locations on the bus stops and street hoardings in *Casting*. The artist is fascinated by the way that people inhabit this space, with the very particular attitude they take and his own brief relationship with them as passers by. The hustle and bustle of Oxford Street creates a tension, a push and shove in the crowd that those weary of London will seek to avoid. To make the works in *Cradle* Goodwin walked on those streets at night, but although he needed to get very close to people to take his shots, and despite the fact that those photographed would find it hard not to be aware of a tall man with a camera taking a picture of them, none of the subjects stopped or spoke to Goodwin or questioned what he was doing. Goodwin does not place himself outside or above the throng, at a critical distance from his subjects. He remains within the maelstrom, immersed with his subjects in the physicality of the street. And yet his reluctance to acknowledge others, and their tendency to ignore him, has enabled the artist to become almost invisible. He can become the anointed *flâneur* described by Baudelaire who can walk through the city and observe its inhabitants as his subjects without being observed himself:

'For the perfect flâneur, for the passionate spectator, it is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite' [1]

In choosing to take photographs on the city streets Goodwin revisits familiar territory for photography, which, from its inception has found this particularly fertile ground, as Walker Evans said: 'I go to the street for the education of my eye and for the sustenance that the eye needs - the hungry eye, and my eye is hungry.' [2] It was the succeeding generation of photographers in America, such as Robert Frank and Garry Winogrand, who were to make this genre their own from the 1950s to the 1970s. However, underlying the innovations of individual artists, the development of this style of photography has also been closely connected to technological advances in camera design. The increasing mobility that small and portable cameras such as the Leica afforded, played a central role in emancipating photographers, allowing them to make work on the move. Although they were not rendered invisible - as is evidenced in the occasional shot where the photographer's shadow is cast into the image (as is so eloquently explored by Lee Friedlander across his work) - it did enable photographers to change their perspective and approach. Most importantly the quick street snapshot prevented those photographed from adopting a pose. However, so much of this process depended on chance and then on work done in the dark room and editing suite, selecting from the many the one image that worked. Recently available digital cameras have increasingly liberated street photographers, giving them a chance to quickly take shots, even at night and from a distance, in which a crisp image with a huge amount of data can be captured. The photograph can then be greatly enlarged in scale and then, as with series such as *Caul*, worked on in the studio. And for Goodwin it is often the studio rather than the dark room in which this work is carried out.

The images in *Caul*, of passengers on the top decks of passing buses, are taken at night looking up from the street, and by increasing the digital camera's sensitivity and using a quick shutter speed Goodwin has been able to work in near darkness yet attain clear, sharp images. It is important to Goodwin that he works with what he has taken, so light levels are not adjusted and features are not changed digitally. However, there is of course one obvious intervention the artist makes, and that, in the case of *Caul*, is to digitally draw, by means of a digital stylus and tablet, over the face of the subjects he has chosen to zoom in and focus on.

Central to all this work is the fact that Goodwin is making portraits of strangers and in doing so he is interested in the mix of anonymity and intimacy in his implied relationship with them. There is a state of mind and expression shared by all his subjects which reminds me of a description of Walker Evans' New York subway portraits: 'suspended in the limbo of the subway car and lost in thought, the people seemed to express pure, unselfconscious emotions - of sadness or exhaustion, boredom or concern, and even, occasionally joy - and they did so in a way that was devoid of artifice or sentimentality'. [3]

Interestingly all the people photographed in Goodwin's work are also in transit: for *Shapeshifter* they are sitting on trains; for *Cradle* and *Casting* they are walking on the street and in *Caul* they sit on buses. Goodwin has said that he is particularly drawn to people at moments of quiet reflection, when their interior life is in some way manifest in a public setting. Of course to capture these reflective moments the subject has to be unaware at the point they are photographed. For Evans to achieve this he had to find ways to conceal his camera. Sitting directly opposite his subject he hid his camera in his coat with its lens barely visible between two buttons. Goodwin did not have to go to such lengths: in *Caul* he was equipped with lenses that could photograph people clearly from afar and in *Cradle* he used the street's own code of avoidance, people's reluctance to see what was right in front of them, to make the work. But, however the photographs were actually taken, there remain ethical issues around taking and then using an image of someone who is not complicit in that act. Walker Evans was not unaware of this and referred to himself as acting like a spy. Goodwin is similarly conscious that this is inherently problematic. Traditions of drawing from life in some ways circumvent these issues as the process of drawing is, of course, less a record and more an 'artist's impression' of a person. And the fact that Goodwin covers the face with a mesh of lines does allow his subjects some degree of anonymity. Yet his implied intrusions also reflect the nature of individual experience now in public space. The areas in which Goodwin is working, as in any major city or town, are ones in which we are constantly being watched and filmed by CCTV surveillance. And, as his work suggests and partly demonstrates, we have no real awareness, let alone control, over how these images are being used, who is storing them and why.

Goodwin's practice of scratching over the faces of the people he photographs and into the surface of the print, creates one of the pivotal tensions in his work. Several artists have employed this strategy before, perhaps most notably the existential Austrian artist Arnulf Rainer, who for years drew over self portraits and found images including death masks. His marks were at times obsessive but always vibrant, reactive and sometimes even destructive to the image underneath. Rainer was an exponent of 'Tachisme', a specifically European movement post-World War II, that had parallels with American Abstract Expressionism. It involved the spontaneous interplay of marks as signs and gestures expressing the emotional condition of the artist. There are undoubted similarities between Rainer's and Goodwin's markings as both artists work spontaneously over the image, particularly the face. However, whereas Rainer's work often seems an attempt to obliterate that which lies underneath it, Goodwin's work is more ambiguous, and despite the intrusive, potentially hostile nature of his marks they also seem to encase, cocoon or protect his subjects.

This sense of empathy, of caring and protecting, is enhanced by the slightly elevated angle, looking downward, from which the photographs are taken. Goodwin's physical height produces this effect, his markings in turn appearing perhaps as the gestural traces of some overseeing guardian angel. As Goodwin inscribes into the photograph, reaching back to his subjects' pensive moments of reflection, his title, *Cradle*, takes on a literal tone, the work as a site of nurturing in which he wonders about these strangers and imagines an affinity and even an intimacy with them.

Linking Goodwin's inscribing to a form of intimacy introduces the idea of the haptic trace, and the artist reaching out to touch his subjects. And the fact that this touch is also a scratching in *Cradle*, might also be read as a violation, a sense of the work again imbued with ambiguity. For *Caul*, however, the touch is not such a physical one, in that Goodwin has employed a new digital process for this work. In this work the drawing on the face is carried out using a Wacom tablet, which has a touch sensitive, membrane-like surface onto which the artist presses with the digital stylus. The more pressure he exerts the deeper and more luminous the line he draws. As in *Cradle* his drawing and working, on what is now a digital surface, produces a web of lines over the faces of his subjects.

Goodwin's title, *Caul*, refers to a portion of the amniotic sac that can be left over a child's face at birth, something that reinforces the visceral quality of the distinctive red lines that cover the faces of the people in the work, like blood vessels or raw tissue. This corporeal reference continues in many ways through all Goodwin's work. At the start of this essay I suggested that in *State* the city is shown as a vibrant and breathing space. If this metaphor is extended and London is seen as a body, its commercial West End can be seen as its beating heart. The roads, trains and bus routes on which Goodwin's subjects travel become the arteries that flow from that heart and the passengers who travel on them are the blood pumping through the city's veins. The use of blood-red on both the livery of the bus but also across the faces of his subjects in *Caul* further emphasises this very corporeal portrayal of the city. Looking through Goodwin's new work there is both a tenderness and humility as we become aware of the transitory, and ultimately insignificant, role we each individually play in the huge human drama that unfolds around us.

Footnotes:

- 1 Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life*, 1859
- 2 G. Moran and J.T. Hill, *Walker Evans: The Hungry Eye*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1993, p. 8.
- 3 S. Greenough, *Walker Evans: Subways and Streets*, National Gallery of Art, Washington, 1991, p.9.

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