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Made Up Love Song by Bettina von Zwehl

A tender relationship between a gallery sitter and an artist photographer is portrayed in a series of miniature profile portraits.

15 Apr 2015

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VISUAL ARTS

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Made Up Love Song documents a new exhibition of photographs by internationally acclaimed German artist, Bettina von Zwehl.

Half of the book is devoted to mesmerizing full-page colour photographs of a female subject, Sophia Birikorang, poised in a head and shoulder profile position looking to the left of the picture frame. These portraits are presented in a circular format, visually recalling the profile views depicted on medals and coins. Their intimate scale, composition and framing reverberates a modern day take on the Museum's collection of miniatures made during the Renaissance period and also of 19th century silhouettes. Indeed, it was the artists' fascination with portable portraiture on display at the V&A, which led to the development of her exhibition, *Made Up Love Song* during her six-month residency at the Museum.

The exhibition catalogue, *Made up love song* comprises an introduction by David Chandler, professor of photography at Plymouth University, who encourages readers to view the arresting portraits in the context of von Zwehl's methodology, sensibilities and her contemporary art practice. Moreover, he provides revealing insights into the evolving relationship between Birikorang and von Zwehl. Professor Chandler also provides an informative analysis of how von Zwehl's photographs could be viewed within the historical and philosophical traditions of profile portraiture – from illuminating the distilled, reductive and strong representation of a person on coins and stamps, to the analysis of the silhouette form that reveals “the essential, resilient truth about a person.”

However, von Zwehl's work does not intend to reveal any 'truth' about Sophia. Rather, as the artist asserts, 'it is much more a contemplation of her being in the moment, a celebration of the here and now.' Certainly, as viewers, we feel the intense presence of the sitter – her eyes fixate on an obscured source of light, she remains undistracted by her surroundings against the pristine darkness of the background wall. The portraits are so diffused and extraordinarily similar to the next, that one could easily overlook the profound and engaged relationship between the artist and her subject. Yet, its intimate size allures readers to examine the photographs more closely with the hope of being able to seize the subtle movements between them. Upon closer inspection, they reveal distinct differences in Birikorang's posture and facial expression, suggesting a changing mood and atmosphere over time. This intense looking and thinking on part of the reader is one that Professor Chandler likens to a meditative reverie – a serene trance-like state that he suggests even the photographer and sitter had experienced.

Most refreshing, is the way in which Professor Chandler associates the metaphor of the 'love song' that emerged from the working relationship between Sophia and Bettina, to an outline of a silhouette, which naturally allures viewers to contemplate the “mysteries of the soul” – its histories, race and representation. To illustrate this concept, he referenced the 18th century physiognomist, Johann Caspar Lavater, who likened a profile portrait to “a hieroglyph that had to be deciphered”. He also quotes the Swiss philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who first reimagined the myth of painting as one of love, emphasising the shadow form as a primitive language through which love expressed itself. It is through these Enlightenment ideas that readers are encouraged to view Zwehl's photographs, providing an effective frame of reference to support our interpretation of the minimalist portraits.

Most fascinating, is the illustrated comparison that Professor Chandler makes between von Zwehl's earlier photographic practice to the miniature portraits displayed in *Made up love song*. Viewers can immediately notice the dismissal of grand-scale photography that increasingly dominates international art galleries and museums. “Information is refined and condensed to detail, reminding us that the history of photography is bound up with holding and touch” said Professor Chandler. On many levels, this photographic series reinforces the dichotomy between personal and shared experiences – the intimacy of personal exchanges between people and artworks in museums, and how these exchanges simultaneously take place within the public realm.

Yet, it is not only the scale that sets von Zwehl's portraits apart from the rest of her work. It is also her newfound use of natural light versus artificial light that lends the photographs a novel painterly quality. Readers become immediately captivated by the subtle gradations of light on Birikorang's face, which was produced by the passing of the seasons, from winter to summer. The portraits were captured on the landing of the Museum's North staircase, a site comprising enormous arched frosted windows that showered the landing area with a soft glow.

The book superbly conveys the juxtaposition of stillness and movement that typically characterizes the medium of photography itself. If one views the portraits in its entirety, one can observe the shift from grey to black in Birikorang's clothes and the sense of time passing, which is confirmed by the indication of the day and time each photograph was taken – this is displayed on the opposing page of each portrait in the book.

We also notice constant motifs across all the portraits. Most obvious, is the ordinary beaded string that hangs loosely on Sophia's neck – her museum security pass; she had worked at the museum for six years after having moved from Ghana to London as a child. The visual repetition instantaneously evokes a sense of routine, which Professor Chandler puts into context by illuminating the ways in which they worked: “Sophia was photographed in the early hours of the morning before her shift would begin – day in and day out, week after week, month after month, season after season” he said. In many ways, this repetition mirrors the ongoing process of refinement and ritual of portrait photography, and also the cumulative nature of their relationship.

But how did this relationship even begin? Von Zwehl photographed people in the museum in search for an appropriate subject for her portraits. Eventually, she worked with the security staff, especially one woman, Birikorang, who was reluctant to contribute. However, after discussion, Birikorang agreed to participate. Interestingly, by the end of the project, Birikorang asserted that the sessions helped her develop a newfound confidence and outgoing attitude to her work, “the project brought out my creative side”, she said.

Whilst von Zwehl had taken over 400 photographs of Birikorang, only 34 were chosen for display. It is in this careful selection of portraits, that viewers grasp a complex enigma of identity that is situated in a particular time and place, allowing us to 'read' a friendship that remains unspoken, unique and fresh.

Overall, *Made up love song* successfully reminds us how museums function as spaces for learning – they provide opportunity for artists to occupy the space as a framework for the creation of new art. This is exceptionally foregrounded through von Zwehl's engagement with the V&A's atmosphere, architecture, people, routine, and culture.

Rating: 3 out of 5 stars

Made Up Love Song by Bettina von Zwehl

Publisher: V&A

Artist: Bettina von Zwehl



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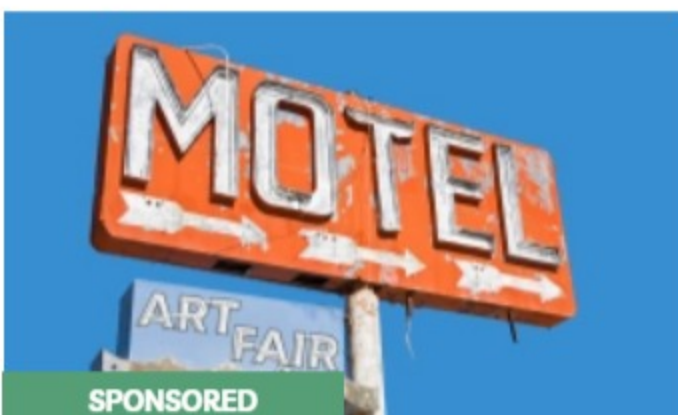
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