EXHIBITION REVIEW

Bernhard Hosa: . . . Like a Phantom Limb . . .
GALERIE RAUM MIT LICHT
VIENNA
NOVEMBER 13–DECEMBER 19, 2014

The temptation to ascribe precise character traits to certain physical appearances is deeply rooted in history. For the ancient Greeks, the expression “kalos kagathos” typified the ideal conjunction of physical beauty and moral goodness. Several centuries later, two disciplines marked the last years of the eighteenth century: physiognomy gained vast popularity, thanks to the work of Swiss pastor Johann Kaspar Lavater, and phrenology developed with German physician Franz Josef Gall. Both practices lost their aura of authority at the end of the nineteenth century and were dismissed as pseudosciences.

Within this cultural context and timeframe, so eager to quantify and classify, so too did the nascent field of photography find application. Alphonse Bertillon, a clerk in the criminal office of the French police department (Préfecture de police), set up a methodology to identify criminals, which became known as Bertillonnage. Through anthropometric surveys and measurements of the arrestees’ bodies and precise photographic guidelines, he reorganized the existing archive and revolutionized the protocol.

Austrian artist Bernhard Hosa’s latest show, . . . Like a Phantom Limb . . ., presented different black-and-white photographic series whose common theoretical premises are to be found in these social manifestations, as it targeted the kind of standardized representation to which normative institutions have historically reduced individuals. Through photography (and sculpture and installations, in a lesser way), the body was dissected and reassembled to create monstrous figures that would make Dr. Frankenstein proud.

In the Auf der Suche nach dem richtigen Bild series (2011), Hosa photographed, enlarged, and assembled mug shots from a 2006 book titled Least Wanted: A Century of American Mugshots, published by Steidl (from Mark Michaelson’s collection, and edited by Michaelson and Steven Kasher), ranging from the 1870s to the 1970s. The artist strategically cut through the photographs of the “wanted” and stapled them back together, conflating the frontal and side views and eliminating any recognizable features, thus denying the very purpose of the identification photographs themselves.

A similar effect was achieved in the works grouped under the title Dissection (2013). This time the pictures portray patients in psychiatric institutions and date to the 1920s. What we see is the result of an artistic intervention on reproductions of the original visuals, initially altered with a drop of white paint. After folding each photograph to symmetrically spread the pigment, the image was cut into modular squares and reconfigured into a new formation, resembling an inkblot from a Rorschach test, used to psychologically assess personality features and possible disorders. Each shattered photograph reveals only small details—hands or a portion of geometrical pavement—leaving us clueless as to the setting and, most importantly, the identity of the sitter. The blotches’ outlines were recalled in the pictures comprising Physical Blur (2014); these irregularly shaped and abstracted photographic collages of shots of hair against white backgrounds were arranged on metal shelves.

Hosa’s parodic and surreal photomontages create freakish and gruesome beings that hit the sweet spot between disturbing and pleasing to the eye. In the series In Place Of (2014), two photos layered on top of each other show hands jutting out of a neck where a head should be, in an otherwise orderly, essential, and clean composition.

The images in Up to sample (2012) are mash-ups of anatomical details, something like cubist mug shots, with big ears, pointed noses, no cheeks, and narrow foreheads. The original images belong to a 1967 book, Das Gesicht des seelisch Kranken (The Face of Mental Illness), by Gerhard Mall, in which a blown-up, full-page portrait would accompany a description and a diagnosis of each psychic syndrome. Hosa folded the pages following a precise method, as if they were origami, and miniaturized the images, hiding some lineaments while highlighting others.

Hosa’s sculptures and installations, such as Dorm and Like a Phantom Limb, both from 2014, also question proportions and the psychic syndrome. Hosa’s parodic and surreal photomontages create freakish and gruesome beings that hit the sweet spot between disturbing and pleasing to the eye. In the series In Place Of (2014), two photos layered on top of each other show hands jutting out of a neck where a head should be, in an otherwise orderly, essential, and clean composition.

The images in Up to sample (2012) are mash-ups of anatomical details, something like cubist mug shots, with big ears, pointed noses, no cheeks, and narrow foreheads. The original images belong to a 1967 book, Das Gesicht des seelisch Kranken (The Face of Mental Illness), by Gerhard Mall, in which a blown-up, full-page portrait would accompany a description and a diagnosis of each psychic syndrome. Hosa folded the pages following a precise method, as if they were origami, and miniaturized the images, hiding some lineaments while highlighting others.

Hosa’s sculptures and installations, such as Dorm and Like a Phantom Limb, both from 2014, also question proportions and the principles of symmetry and the golden ratio, while referring to the mental conditioning of cultural codes, social and medical practices, and, in a wider sense, of hegemony.

By creating his own anthropopgy, the artist decries the social and legal use of photography as a means to depersonify people and reduce them to types. The result is more than just Mr. Potato Head crossed with high art. Hosa challenges the visual stereotypes that inform society’s morality, wherein any transgression or divergence from the norm is typically judged and censured. The result is a short circuit of the mechanisms that might otherwise lead to social prejudice; Hosa’s photographs are devoid of any certifying value. And those who are socially alienated and shunned are not only reconfigured, but also rehabilitated.

LUISA GRIGOLETTO is an arts writer based in Rome.