

## Definition Averted

Corina Gertz's lustrous and luminous body of work *The Averted Portrait* is itself an act of averting. It defies categorisation and wards off interpretation. It is a beautiful and elegant contradiction.

As a curator of portraits, I am frequently questioning the suitability of an artwork for entering the collection. The criteria for acquisitions have appropriately mutated since the National Portrait Gallery's instigation based upon Victorian ideals of celebrity. One of the founders, the historian Thomas Carlyle, described a portrait as 'a small lighted candle by which "Biographies" could for the first time be read'.<sup>1</sup> In fact, the portrait's power predates linguistic description, as John Berger noted: 'Seeing comes before words.'<sup>2</sup>

The portrait in Western art has been defined as a representation of a particular person – usually intended to capture their likeness or personality. Beyond a simple record, a portrait is often used to describe power, virtue, wealth, and beauty. It can memorialise.

Early Netherlandish painting developed the key to the individualised portrait. A likeness of the sitter was sought. Furthermore, during the 'Golden Age' of Dutch art, portrait painters broke from the Baroque to concern themselves with depicting the real world. Parallels with Gertz's observations can be drawn with Johannes Vermeer's depth of colour, considered composition, and superior use of light. Still life from this period inspires her work. As is the case in Gertz's photographs, exotic detail provides a gateway to meaning and symbolism. The Dutch painter flaunts his skill, while the tangible realism of his brush is echoed through Gertz's lens. Another resemblance is the background of Gertz's works. They are devoid of distraction; beyond the figure there is nothingness. We are brought with immediacy to the surface, to the texture and intricacy of the handmade and hand-touched: the care taken to tie a bow, the precision of a stiffened collar, a smoothed hanging tassel, a fluffed feather, a pinned stray hair. And as with Dutch still life, in every detail there is meaning.

Through these details there is a human element. Gertz describes a 'body tension'. But are these faceless photographs portraits? Since its inception, photography has been a key means of portraiture, but conversely the portrait is 'one of the most problematic areas of photographic practice – fraught with ambiguity ... In what sense can a literal image express the inner world and being of an individual before the camera?'<sup>3</sup>

Since the daguerreotypists' 'operations' to capture with light something akin to the painted portrait using accoutrements to describe a profession, status, or skill, the photograph has become more concerned with expressing an assumed 'inner being'. As photography developed, apparent 'character revelations' began to define successful portraiture.

A representation of individual essence considered without the effects of history or society, however, has been overturned. Our contemporary understanding of the interactions – aesthetic, cultural, and political – between the photographer, sitter, and viewer allows for a nuanced reading of portraiture.

In Gertz's photographs of folk dress across nations, there exist numerous expressions of the individual. There is a series of codes through which the female subject is framed. But these codes are tied to the traditions of a country or region, through dress. They are, for the most part, not directly tied to her personality. For Gertz, the faces that she has come to know through developing rapport with her sitters are for us a distraction that has been omitted.

Gertz, however, is concerned with identity of the constructed kind, not of a superficial one. Of a kind that has been woven by and through generations of women. To wear is to become.

These averted portraits are portraits of generations; they are expressions of many women, together greater than the individual. They describe collectives, societies, cultures – they cannot be categorised into 'truthful representations' nor 'revelations of the soul', and yet they portray.

That Gertz is compelled to travel and make her art is in part anthropological. To literalise, record, immortalize a tradition in decline. Yet her project is not ethnographic, but rather aesthetic. It does not share the elusive nature of fashion photography, the specifics of ephemeral garments, captured with the gestures, body shapes, and styles of an age. The organic nature of Gertz's garments is instead stilled, the performative nature of dressing-up settled. Timeless.

The plane of the body is flattened, shapes are abstracted, and at first glance we can simply see pattern, shape, form, and colour. A step closer, another look, life-size, there is a body, a woman, a connection. Through Gertz's systematic approach, akin to her Düsseldorf School forebears, I become connected to my Chinese sister, my German counterpart, French, Swiss, Italian, Kenyan, Romanian, Mexican, Slovakian, Spanish, Thai, and Czech in equal measure. Without her face to possess the image, I could be her. I imagine myself in these garments showing modesty, offering protection from opposing climates, providing and adorning routes through rites of passage.

Gertz's portrayals are anti-individualistic and deeply personal all at once. In defying definition, Gertz's *Averted Portraits* distil, to provide the viewer with something essential and complete.

1 Thomas Carlyle, *Collected Works: Critical and Miscellaneous Essays*, vol. VI (London, 1869), p. 242.

2 John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London, 1972), chapter 1 intro.

3 Graham Clarke, 'Chapter 6: The Portrait in Photography', in *The Photograph* (Oxford, 1997).