

Rather than providing a window onto a recognisable world, as most photographs do, Justine Varga's cameraless photographs engage directly with the history and materiality of photography as a mimetic technological process, which signalled the birth of modernism when it was invented in the early 1800s. Because they are human-sized, Varga's seemingly abstract images appeal directly to our bodies; luminous and magnetic, they draw us into their layered, colour-strafed surfaces and subvert our understanding of the medium's relationship with time and space and its ability to reproduce recognisable characteristics of people and places. Varga's photographs come into being over surprisingly long periods – some of the exposures in this exhibition were made over years – and they were not necessarily continuous but sometimes occurred at intermittent intervals, further challenging our assumptions about what a photograph looks like and how it is made.

Although the six photographs in Varga's exhibition *End of Violet* don't depict a visual likeness of the artist, they can nevertheless be understood as haptic self-portraits because they contain direct traces of Varga's body as she exposed the negatives to light and worked directly on them in the darkroom. On the surface of these prints, and especially on their edges, you can see fingerprints and other traces of Varga's physical handling and interventions as she abraded, drew and applied different substances, including her saliva, onto the negatives.

In the work *End of Violet (66.5Y14.5M)*, an interlocking series of sinuous, black lines swarm across the reddish-brown background, bringing to mind the linear, kinetic energy of New Zealand artist Len Lye's experimental films – made when he scratched and painted images directly onto celluloid film. Like Lye, Varga immerses herself deeply in the materiality of film to determine how far she can push its physical capabilities and challenge its representational conventions. Because her prints rely on a complex series of exposures and inscriptions, most of which occur in the darkroom, they are the antithesis of Cartier Bresson's 'decisive moment' – the brilliant term he used to describe the defining moment when the camera's shutter is released. Despite the apparent spontaneous aesthetic of Varga's photographs, chance and accident play a small role. "People often use the word happenstance, or chance, in relation to my work but there really isn't that much left over to chance in my photography. I am working within quite tight parameters, and I am using a very limited number of materials. I use the negative, and some prosaic materials, such as those found within a single bag of pens and markers that belonged to my grandmother."¹

In 2017, Australian-born Varga won the Olive Cotton Award for Photographic Portraiture with her cameraless photograph *Maternal Line* (2017). This moody portrait of her relationship with her grandmother was a controversial win because it challenged ideas about portraiture – the assumption that a portrait depicts a recognisable individual – and photography – the understanding that a photograph has a strong correlation with 'the real' and that 'the real' is a document that records the visual appearance of the world. Instead, Varga's photograph documented the pressure of her grandmother's hand as she scribbled on the surface of a negative

¹ Gronberg and Magnusson, "Developing the Darkroom – A Conversation with Justine Varga."

and recorded traces of her grandmother's saliva, which was applied to the film. Arguably, *Maternal Line* went straight to the heart of identity by enfolding Varga's grandmother's physical identity – her bodily fluids and gestures – rather than her mere appearance. In this sense, the portrait challenged our assumption that the visual trumps all other senses, and that appearance is more important than haptic and lived experiences. Instead of vision, Varga's portrait emphasised the importance of touch and celebrated small, often overlooked moments of intimacy between individuals. Varga's celebration of touch and intimacy (what can be more intimate than spit?) rather than of more spectacular visual markers of identity accords with feminist art's suspicion of the spectacle and of the primacy of appearance when thinking about and representing feminine identity. Importantly, *Maternal Line* completely avoids the objectification of the feminine body that is so prevalent in the history of portraiture in both painting and photography. The work proposes a new way of understanding and representing identity and presence through the medium of photography.

Varga's portrait also celebrates the collaborative process of making that occurred between the artist and her grandmother to bring this ambitious work into being. Writing in *The Guardian* in 2017, senior curator of photography at the National Gallery of Australia and award judge Shaune Lakin commented, "It has been a long time since a photograph or photography as a subject has created so much public discussion in Australia. It's certainly the first time contemporary Australian photography has made the front page of one of the major print dailies since an exhibition of Bill Henson's work was shut down by the police in 2008." Responding to the complaint that the work shouldn't have won because it wasn't a photograph, Lakin said, "Cameraless contact-printed photographs have been there from the start when during the 1830s Henry Fox Talbot made photogenic drawings and John Herschel cyanotypes. They have also been crucial to the history of avant-garde photography, whether as Laszlo Moholy-Nagy's photograms or as the surrealist photographer Man Ray's Rayographs."²

The numbers and letters in the titles of the photographs in *End of Violet* provide clues about what happened in the darkroom; they identify the colour filtration Varga used to give the works their highly saturated hues. The coloured borders in these prints mark a new direction for Varga who aims to complicate the relationship between the centre and the edges so that we are not sure where the photograph begins and ends. In conventional analogue printing the light from the enlarger is contained within a tightly controlled rectangle and Varga's choice to allow the light to spread beyond the frame, creating a visible coloured border, is yet another transgression of photographic tradition. By creating a border Varga wanted "to challenge the hierarchy between the edge and the centre, to bring attention to the way that the centre generates the edge, but also the way in which the edge informs the centre. In other words, the two are always a complex entwinement."³

In the work *End of Violet (102.5Y70M10C)* three vertical, curved, red lines float on a turbulent sea of blue and black. The magenta seems to bleed from the centre of the image, escaping the dense, black line that marks the gap between the edge of the negative and the edge of the negative carrier in the enlarger. Three similar red lines, arranged this time in a horizontal format, punctuate the space in *End of Violet (72Y50.5M10C)*. The uppermost line looks like a quick, whimsical sketch of a moustache sitting atop, but not entirely obliterating, the scribbled black lines on the dirty, brown background. Its lightness of touch reminds me of the moustache

² Lakin, Shaune, "Why I Chose the 'Spit and Scribble' Photograph: Olive Cotton Judge on the Global Furore."

³ Gronberg and Magnusson, "Developing the Darkroom – A Conversation with Justine Varga."

that Marcel Duchamp drew on a cheap postcard reproduction of the Mona Lisa in his irreverent 1919 readymade *L.H.O.O.Q.* There is a teasing quality in Varga's photographs, which prompt us to guess at the processes that brought them to life. In most of them, we can discern the actions of the artist's body engaged in energetic drawing. However, *Quarantine* seems to have formed more autonomously, evoking the world of nature rather than culture – spiky, Prussian blue lines and smudges splashed across an aquamarine background look like microorganisms seen through a microscope.

With their visceral, painterly surfaces and dazzling colours, the works in *End of Violet* recall the aesthetics of abstract expressionism. However, rather than alluding to high emotions and heroic gestures as did the expressionists, Varga pays attention to the mundane, overlooked moments in everyday life. Her work quietly unravels the physical and chemical processes of photography as well as the way these processes have shaped our cultural and social understanding of the medium. Deeply engaged with the history of that medium, she reflects on how these understandings have changed over time.

When we speak of 'taking' a photograph there is an assumption that we are capturing a latent image that already exists in the world. Varga's images deny instantaneity; they come into being over extended periods, and if you look closely, you can see the evidence of how they were made. They affirm the wise words attributed to Ansel Adams and later quoted by Alfredo Jaar: "You do not take a photograph. You make it."

Dr Virginia Were, June 2024

Bibliography

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