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NUDES NEVER WEAR GLASSES

First in a series of responses to Edinburgh Art Festival, Victoria Horne reviews Kate Davis' solo exhibition at Stills 28 July - 8 October



Nudes Never Wear Glasses, silver gelatin print (2017) Kate Davis. Copyright the artist.

During last year's Edinburgh Art Festival, Stills staged an exhibition of works by documentary photographer Jo Spence. [1] In a pleasing twist, Spence's words provide the title for this year's festival display: a collection of photographs and films by Glasgow-based artist Kate Davis.

Visitors to *Nudes Never Wear Glasses* are welcomed by a found photograph of a classical nude statue, to which Davis has added the eponymous glasses, crudely scratched onto the surface. This act of détournement re-presents Spence's words as visual prank: playfully exposing the contradictions between body and intellect, femininity and rationality, that have underpinned modern art and its institutions. That the statue is clearly located in a pedagogical studio environment adds weight to this critique, intimating by association the educational logic that prohibited women artists from entering the classroom, while glorifying abstract femininity within. The photograph thus establishes key feminist themes that characterise much of Davis' output, preparing visitors for the witty archival retrievals to follow.

The selection of images incorporate snippets of contemporary stock photography, sketches from nineteenth-century drawing manuals, and clipped photographs showing the artist's ear, mouth and eye. Cut up and juxtaposed, these materials begin to unstitch the dense representational field within which the female body has been framed and has acquired its aesthetic status. Ranging across art history, commercial and vernacular photography, these materials cumulatively suggest the various institutional languages that encode visual representation. This aspect of Davis' work plainly marks a generative engagement with Spence's earlier investigations into the ideological effects of photographic imagery.

The exhibition space itself is overwhelmed by the intrusion of temporary brick walls on which the photographs hang. This spatial rhythm is sustained by the exhibition board and hanging film-screens that split the back room; those

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[The Weight of History](#)

Victoria Horne considers 'Weight', a video work by Kate Davis. Essay published as part of 'Footnoting the

divisions and physical impositions compressing the available space. According to the exhibition flyer this is a direct reference to Sara Ahmed's evocative writing on institutional walls. "You come up against what others do not see; and (this is even harder) you come up against what others are invested in not seeing." [2] The walls therefore manifest as sculptural extensions of the archival photographic investigations. Davis seeks to make art's ideological barriers temporarily concrete, an act of 'making visible' that extends the project of second-wave feminism and insists against its conclusion.

The exhibition is dominated by two moving-image works: 'Weight' (2014) and 'Charity' (2017). By screening the films on an alternating loop the resonances between them are underscored, and the exhibition makes a compelling case for reading them together as part of a sustained research project examining the role of representation in reinforcing and naturalising the gendered aspects of reproductive labour. 'Weight' adapts a 1961 documentary script about the sculptor Barbara Hepworth and transforms the dialogue from a romantic celebration of art-making, to an ironic celebration of home-making. The montaged images of the Cornish seaside and Hepworth working in her studio are replaced with urban housing estates, supermarkets and archival images of women cleaning. By replicating the rhythms and phrases of the conventional documentary format, Davis's film exposes the gap that exists between 'art' and 'domestic' in our social imaginary. In 'Weight', the descriptive language and its subject clashes with droll results.

Davis's most recent film, 'Charity', develops related themes. Formally, however, it incorporates greater discomfiting elements—possibly in homage to the deconstructive tactics of 1970s and 80s feminist documentary makers. A female narrator speaks soothingly over a montage of still images drawn from art history. These include an extraordinary variety of paintings and statues depicting women breastfeeding. This stitched narrative is violently interrupted by noisy, abstract clips that slowly resolve to disclose mundane tasks including washing up, brushing the floor, a tumble dryer spinning and a baby crawling. There is a sharp distinction between the strange and humorous art historical representations of breastfeeding and the overwhelmingly agitated 'home video' camera.

The work's title conjures the pious, moralising art of the early modern period in which the virtue of 'charity' was personified as a woman breastfeeding. As in 'Weight', women's creative experiences are suggested to exceed the narrow representational categories allowed by art and its history. However, the politics of this later film are more pronounced. The narration openly frames breastfeeding and childcare as a form of labour by reciting those bodily tasks in the form of a job description. This plainly situates the film in relation to socialist-feminist theories which argued that childcare contributes to the successful reproduction and maintenance of a workforce and, therefore, is economically productive and should be valued as such. [3] Locating housework within the productive sphere would enable homeworkers to collectively organise: an argument intimated in the lines, 'since we're not allowed to join a union we're not allowed to make our voices heard'. The gallery's exhibition text misleadingly describes this as a 'cerebral twist' when it is in fact an activist politics cultivated from the chaotic, lived experiences of women; the opposite of dry intellectualism. If charity is labour that is voluntary, unpaid, and often undervalued, Davis prompts her audience to consider whether childcare falls within its remit and why this burden falls mainly onto women's shoulders.

Walking out of the exhibition a photograph near the door catches my eye again. The image of an American revolutionary soldier has been smeared with paint and the resulting print jarringly appears to show the man breastfeeding. On my way in the photograph was amusing, but since watching the films it has new implications. The photographed statue commemorates a Minuteman soldier, part of a decentralised form of militia that played a significant role in the Revolutionary War. The juxtapositions between military and maternal, public and private, between masculine and feminine are suddenly clarified. With the narration of 'Charity' still running through my head, the strange photograph opens up

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Quiet Heat: an Introduction
Dave Young introduces 'Quiet Heat: Archive Machines and War Fever'. Commissioned as part of 'Footnoting the Archive', and produced using research conducted during a remote residency at the Artist Run Data Center, run by Servus in Linz, Austria, in late 2015. The extended text is hosted by the Artist Run Data Centre and accessible at quietheat.dvyng.com
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questions around whose 'revolutions' are publicly recorded and celebrated, whose labour is recognised and rewarded, and what kinds of struggles are valued?

Referring back to Spence's words in the exhibition title is significant. It demonstrates that contemporary feminism is not only a matter of what Griselda Pollock terms 'interventions' within art's dominant institutions, but also of tracing historical solidarity, of ensuring we learn from and extend earlier activist moments—something Davis's work enacts in its joyful plundering of history and careful reconsideration of representational legacies.

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[1] See: <http://thisistomorrow.info/articles/jo-spence-1>

[2] *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017). See Ahmed's blog: <https://feministkilljoys.com>

[3] For example, see Silvia Federici's 'Wages Against Housework' (1975). Available at: <https://caringlabor.wordpress.com/2010/09/15/silvia-federici-wages-against-housework/>

