

Public Art/Private Lives

Terry Kurgan



I'm the King of the Castle 1997 C print Edition 3 405X305mm

Terry Kurgan's solo exhibition, *Public Art/Private Lives*, is an act of reflection, and of re-looking at aspects of a career's work to date. An endeavor to rearticulate through revised collation and reconsidered pairing some key bodies of her work that continue to speak, both intimately and more overtly, to themes that have defined her interests and creative practice over many years.

There is a meticulous continuity in the nature of Kurgan's questionings. Her vigorous engagement over the years with what photographs mean – of how subjects perform for and within the act of consciously being photographed – has been extensive and significant. She has, and continues to probe, refract and deepen her complex reading and articulation of the nature of photography. Kurgan has produced countless portraits over the years, both photographic and via other print and drawn media that nevertheless still work with photographs as her primary source and subject. In all of these she brings awareness to the frame and the act of framing in portraiture: how, among other things, subjects enact themselves and consciously construct their framing environments, and what those images come to mean – both for and outside of themselves, in the present and beyond. They are keenly perceptive inquiries into the nature of subjectivity and representation.

Kurgan's career to date has been defined by two parallel working domains: one that engages people in the public sphere, and the other strongly personal and closer to home. At the centre of her engagement with both of these lived spaces is an exploration of notions of intimacy. And this is perhaps one of the most bold and enduring achievements in her work. She brings an astute sensibility to reading and intuiting the subjects of her portraits, insightfully and with sensitivity, while simultaneously recognising their right to determine their own staging. It is a negotiated transaction, which she approaches with the intention of engaging the portrait as a necessarily human space.

Kurgan's portraits pose subtle visual questions – the who, the why, the what – to which she delicately proffers suggestions rather than answers, like a fragile veil creating a fine balance between intimacy and exposure (and by extension, the narrowing of distance between public and private). Kurgan's perceptive adjustment of this 'veil' echoes an additional key attribute inherent to the very nature of photographs, which is the way that the medium simultaneously embodies presence and absence. Kurgan extends this tension into the possibilities of visual exposure or obscuration in her images, as well as to a metaphorical application of what is seen or apparent, and what is hidden or undisclosed; between the photograph's capacity to foreground absence, or alternatively (and opposite), to claim presence in the face of (social/political/other) invisibility. This is true also for Kurgan's transference of image and detail to her drawings, which, through emulating in some aspects the cumulative or reductive process of photographic exposure, find their incisive space between the photographic and the more overtly constructed space of drawing.

The resulting images that Kurgan produces or collates are complex: they are as much studies of the subjects' desire to perform themselves as they are inquiries into what can be read from an image, on the surface and deeper. They question how we see ourselves – and others – through the evidence of an image; how we develop narratives based on the constructed memories and fictions of photographs, and the ambiguities and power that those images maintain for us. They speak too, to the awkward inequality of the photographic transaction.

In this review exhibition, Kurgan reassembles older bodies of work in relation to new ones, and the more 'public' images of her practice are explored against her own archive of private or intimate reflections on self and family. The process reveals striking parallels in her work across these divides – not simply at a formal level of composition and staging, or in their echoing aesthetics, but in how the space between public and



Looking Back 1999 C print Edition 3 210X295mm Photo: Jessie Lewis

private can so easily blur, and the questions of family or public find their confluence in how they resonate at the level of being human.

A critical impetus for this exhibition has been the completion of Kurgan's book, *Hotel Yeoville* – a culmination both of her project of the same name, and of an intimate and detailed interrogation of her own art practice, public and private, over the years. Kurgan's reflections on this three-year long participatory art project that evolved in the Johannesburg suburb of Yeoville – which, for over a decade has become an itinerant home to immigrants and refugees from many other parts of the African continent – and that sought to reintroduce zones of privacy and intimacy into a largely alienating and inhospitable urban public space, speak vividly and evocatively about her art practice generally. The digital images and stories that were recorded by visitors to the *Hotel Yeoville Project*, and then collated and reworked into Kurgan's artwork and book, reveal enactments of intimate exposure, of desire, playfulness and of poetic telling of personal narratives in the face of broader, and harsher, socio-political realities.

The resonances of many of these images from *Hotel Yeoville* with some of Kurgan's earlier works, are noteworthy, especially in relation to works that have engaged the intimacies of Kurgan's own family. Innocent experimentations with re/presenting the self to the camera – in *Hotel Yeoville*, in front of a computer monitor set up to record self-styled video clips – find parallels with images from Kurgan's photographic series, *I'm the King of the Castle* (1997), which features her then six-year-old son performing for his mother and for the camera. Numerous portraits of parents with their children photographing themselves in the photo booth in the *Hotel Yeoville* space both echo and complicate images from Kurgan's *Maternal Exposures* (1999), where she presented alternative portraits of pregnancy and motherhood in the maternity wards of public hospitals

in Cape Town; and resonate with other more idyllically performed moments of mothers with their children in *Park Pictures* (2004) – (a work that included unclaimed commissioned portraits taken by the photographers in Joubert Park); with photographs taken in a portable photo studio set up by Kurgan in Joubert Park as part of the *Joubert Park Project* (2001); and with found family photographs in *Family Affairs* (1999) and *Lost and Found* (2000). While *Hotel Yeoville* attested to the stories and distances travelled by immigrants to the city, boldly asserting their presence and visibility, *Park Pictures* reflected the city's constantly shifting history, and the economics and culture of Joubert Park as a microcosm representing this shift.

And finally, Kurgan's practice – in the face of this intimate unveiling of disguise and disclosure – speaks also, poignantly and in a somewhat paradoxical way, to the ephemerality of the moment that the photograph captures: of its imminent loss. Several works come to mind here as exquisite motifs representing that inevitable incapacity to still the moment. A number of self-portraits from *Hotel Yeoville* capture a digital trail of pixels out of the frame as the sitter leaves the camera's field of 'vision'; a photographically blurred image of a little boy, having just been nakedly performing his childish masculinity for his mother, leaving the frame; the evolving repetition and fading of detail in the drawing of her *Still, Life* (2011) portraits; and in *Skip* (2003), the bitter-sweet simplicity of a little girl skipping, playfully, spiritedly out of reach, beyond the borders.

Tracy Murinik, February 2013

Terry Kurgan runs an active studio and public sphere practice and has created a diverse body of artwork that explores notions of intimacy, pushing at the boundaries between 'the private' and 'the public' in the South African public cultural domain. Working across a broad range of media from drawing, printmaking and photography to enlisting public participation in a practice that produces human interaction and social experiences, she explores the tension between politics and poetics, and between acts of intimate exposure and an inhospitable public realm. Domestic photography, and the complexity of the photographic interaction itself, is a central theme in her practice.

Kurgan received a BAFA from the California School of Arts in San Francisco and an MFA from the Michaelis School of Fine Art, University of Cape Town. She has been awarded numerous grants and prizes, including the FNB Vita Art Prize (2000), BASA awards (2007, 2009) and a PUMA Creative Mobility Award (2010). *Hotel Yeoville* was shortlisted for the 2012 International Award for Excellence in Public Art (IAPA). Kurgan has exhibited and published broadly in South Africa and internationally. Recent exhibitions and projects include, *Figures & Fictions: Contemporary South African Photography* at the V&A Museum, London (2011), *Still, life* at Gallery AOP Johannesburg (2011), *Hotel Yeoville* (2008–11), and *Idensitat07: Home/Away*, Barcelona (2008–10). Recent publications include 'Park Pictures' in *Unfixed: Photography and Postcolonial Perspectives in Contemporary Art* (Jap Sam Books, 2012) and 'Public Art/Private Lives' in *Private Lives and Public Cultures in South Africa* (Special Issue, *Cultural Studies Journal*, 2013).

This brochure accompanies the exhibition *Public Art/Private Lives* by Terry Kurgan at GALLERY AOP, Johannesburg, February/March 2013

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