



BILL JACOBSON:

THOUGHT SERIES PHOTOGRAPHS, 1993-1999

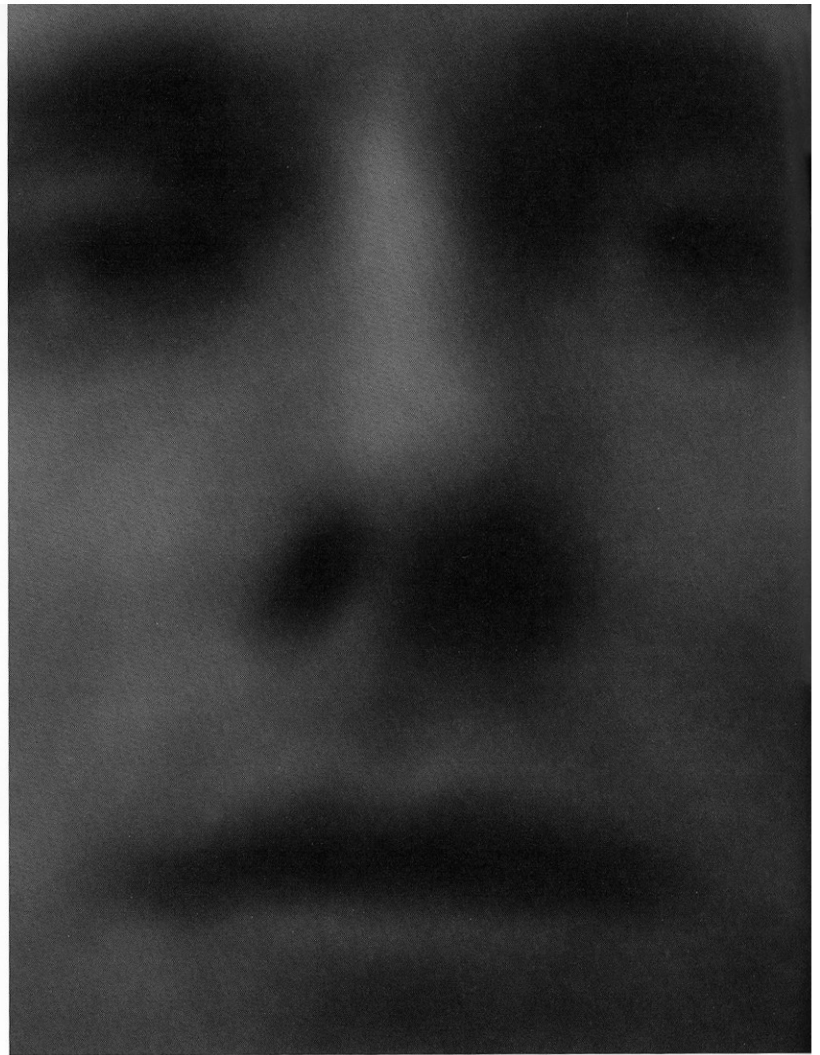
JONATHAN R JONES

A three-quarter-length portrait of a nude male is conjured in the subtlest of greys. The figure seems to float into the space of the viewer. Its blurred outline and uncertain location suggest an ethereal other world or the action of the mind as it struggles to bring an image into focus. Bill Jacobson's work subverts the conventions of portraiture and draws attention to the very process of cognition itself. He is an artist who allows theorists to indulge their senses. The fragmented faces of his *Thought Series* might be read in terms of the postmodern fracture, but Jacobson's incomplete bodies suggest an acute intimacy rather than the impossibility of unity. The most ardent of cultural theorists will find it difficult not to be seduced by the scopophilic delights offered by Jacobson's sumptuous gelatin silver prints.

As if still emerging from the developing fluid, these are images in their infancy. Pallid and sometimes frail or painfully emaciated, his figures are as naked and vulnerable as new-born babies. They appear delicate and fragile, yet we are left in no doubt as to their corporeal presence. These are not ghosts. They are flesh and bone. The matt surfaces of Jacobson's prints take on the quality of dewy skin; soft and moist like freshly developed prints. The traces left on the photographic paper become like bruises on flesh. The notion of photography as a modern-day Veronica's veil has become commonplace but here it seems particularly apt.

The *Thought Series* also includes closely cropped landscapes and brooding seascapes reminiscent of the work of Vija Celmins or Hiroshi Sugimoto. Works such as *Thought Series #703* evoke the Romantic tradition in German landscape painting, suggesting the quintessentially existential act of 'looking out to sea'. Both the figure-works and landscapes appear to play upon the defining process of photography itself – the transformation and fixing of the latent image to reveal a visible one.

Since Jacobson is a gay man based in New York it may be tempting to read these works, produced between 1993 and 1999, as a response to the AIDS epidemic. However, his photographs are more tender and more reflective than the still lifes of Robert Mapplethorpe or the subcultural documentary of Nan Goldin. Jacobson's works possess a tenderness and poignancy which never becomes sentimental. The works could be seen to perpetuate the nineteenth-century function of photography as memorial but they are far removed from the tradition of the deathbed portrait. Close-ups of the face, like *Thought Series #2528*, seem to suggest the anxiety of ageing or the impossibility of accurately remembering the



dead. As Jacobson moves in closer, the image remains blurred. His subjects refuse to be pinned down; details do not convey detail. While it seems useful and indeed important to understand Jacobson's work within the context in which it was made, the loss that the works describe is capable of transcending rigid boundaries.

Although this is the first solo show of Bill Jacobson's work in the UK, he has exhibited widely in the USA and across Continental Europe. Audiences in the UK may recall his work in the National Touring Exhibition *Secret Victorians* and more recently in *Breathless!: Photography and Time* at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Exhibited here at Rhodes + Mann they can be evaluated on their own terms, rather than being dimly pigeon-holed as work 'about' loss, memory or time. While the idea of loss does pervade Jacobson's work, the ultimate loss that they express might be read in terms of what Ernst van Alphen has called the 'loss of self'. Blurred boundaries and a preoccupation with skin and surface seem to beg that key psychoanalytic question: where do I end and where do you begin?

Bill Jacobson: Thought Series Photographs, 1993-1999 is at Rhodes + Mann, London, until 12 November

BILL JACOBSON,
Thought Series #2528,
1998, gelatin silver print,
91.5 x 71 cm. Courtesy:
Rhodes + Mann, London