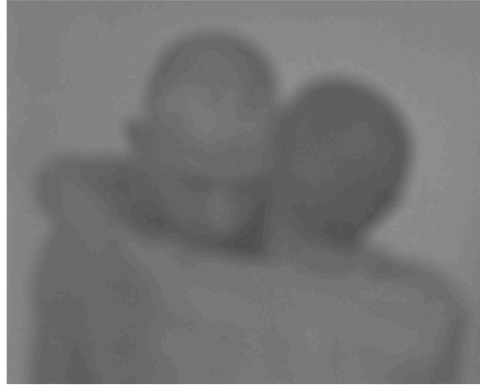


James Cary Parkes talks to the American photographer Bill Jacobson about aids to memory and the memory of AIDS

Looking beyond loss



The dying of the light: Jacobson replaces the concept of remembrance with one of an historical timelessness

“Watch the dim shades as like ghosts they go and come,” wrote Shelley. And, like the poet’s vision of hesitant departure and uncertain return, the American photographer Bill Jacobson makes pictures that exchange confirmed notions of recording passing and memory with something more ambivalent and problematically diffuse.

Jacobson consciously works from a fixed point - the time of AIDS - but from this visible vantage, his photographs reach backwards and forwards. And here time may only be measured mecurially. Assumptions of identity, individuality and remembrance become vulnerable, almost cryptic, affairs.

Jacobson’s photographs are literally blurred and filtered of any definite detail. The once seemingly eternal archetypes of gay desire, the naked and semi-naked male body, are transformed into ethereal and detached forms. Time passing or time approaching merge, as expressions of love and loss have also, in the complicated complex of AIDS, become intimately inextricable.

Currently in exhibition at London’s Photographers’ Gallery, Bill Jacobson’s work, entitled *Interim Portraits and Sentient Beings*, provides an excellent opportunity to view the sophisticated and sensitive ways in which gay American artists are dealing and developing approaches to, and reflections on, the AIDS epidemic.

Jacobson talks about his art with a quality of care that expresses the importance of the subject matter and the necessity for it to convey simultaneously both individual sentiments and collective predicament. “For me the work refers to the known and unknown; to the well, the dying and the dead,” he says, “and to the fading of our memories and the recurring of our dreams”.

As a personal manifesto of his photography, Jacobson immediately throws into question and debate prevalent art prac-

nance but by whatever degree they should lose their initial point of reference contribute “ultimately to some sense of history”.

In traditional mourning art, the concept of memory and active remembrance is comforting in the sense that it implies some kind of permanence and the retrieval of something tangible from loss. Jacobson takes this process to task. “My work is not intended to be a memorial to people who are dying, and is not really a documentation of AIDS, but works more as a parable or a

says “they made me consider other losses in my own life, issues in childhood and adult relationships. Some kind of sadness—connects them as the photographs are, in a way, a vehicle to notice loss.”

Jacobson’s photographs, with their insistence on metaphor and, if not a fatalistic, then at least an “organic” make-up lend themselves to a generously wide degree of individual interpretations. “Are they a personal vision or a collective experience?” he considers, rhetorically. “Well I think that they can be both and I accept that there will be a tension between those two things, I accept it as a part of the process of making art that deals with such issues as AIDS and is something that won’t ever be resolved.”

If Jacobson’s photographs operate in a metaphorical fashion then they amount to a profound critique of AIDS and, in its widest meaning, mortality. Eschewing polemical debates about the present, they instead connect our moment with a kind of timelessness. And if we are invited to speculate on the fading of memories and the transience of time then that, in some ways, reinforces the immediate realities of a phenomena such as the AIDS crisis - its importance and its potentially awesome effects.

● *Interim Portraits & Sentient Beings* by Bill Jacobson is at The Photographers’ Gallery, Great Newport Street, London WC2, 071-831 1772, until 17 March.

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tices dealing with AIDS. Traditional memorial art, from the raw sentimentality of the AIDS Quilt to the haunting, highly personalised self-portraiture of, say, Robert Mapplethorpe, holds at its core an attempt or a hope that memories of individual passing may be retained. The idea that “We Will Remember” is not denied in Jacobson’s work but what is added is both an honest and a disquieting realism, which is, he believes, “that as photographs physically fade, so does memory”. What is retained are reminders, points of connection that may, or may not, have some future reso-

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