

*By Different Device: Polaroid Portraits of the Artist As...*  
Mardee Goff, MA *Curating the Art Museum* '12

Two of the works in the exhibition *Portrait of the Artist As...* use Polaroid as a medium in order to portray the artist: Richard Hamilton in his [\*Portrait of Derek Jarman\*](#), 1996-1997, and Saul Fletcher in his self-portrait [\*Untitled #212 \(S/P Saul\)\*](#), 2009. In these works, the artists capitalise on the inherent properties of the medium as means for their artistic expression, but in different ways. Fletcher draws upon minute dimensions and Hamilton produces an imprint of time. While other photographic methods can capture things exactly the way they appear, the size and technical capacity of a Polaroid image tends to capture with immediacy an atmosphere, a detail, or a moment at the expense of the whole picture. Instantly developed, the medium leaves little room for artistic manipulation and requires the artist to leave many elements to chance. In both Hamilton's and Fletcher's photographic expressions the artists exploit the Polaroid's capacity for the pictorial encapsulation of an experience.

In Hamilton's *Portrait of Derek Jarman*, a Polaroid image of the filmmaker and painter Derek Jarman becomes a testament to the transience of human existence. Hamilton had actually intended for Jarman to take a photograph of him for his autobiographical series of *Polaroid Portraits*, in which he asked other artists, such as Francis Bacon and Gilbert & George, to snap his picture. The series comprises of 128 portraits of Hamilton produced by other artists between 1968 and 2001, and chronicles 33 years of the artist's life. Both autobiographical and biographical, Hamilton's complete series simultaneously serves as a compilation of self-portraits and a body of portraits of him made by other artists.

The picture of Jarman used in *Portrait of Derek Jarman* is in part a record of this process. This image was never intended as a portrait. Rather, Hamilton captured the blurred image of his friend Jarman while adjusting the camera's focus for him. At the time Jarman was losing his eyesight to AIDS. The spontaneous nature of the Polaroid is amplified in the means through which the image came to be.

The resulting unpremeditated image of Jarman has been superimposed on an ultra-sharp image of [\*Ataxia - AIDS is Fun \(1993\)\*](#), Jarman's last painting. The artist suffered from Ataxia, a neurological dysfunction caused by AIDS, which results in the

failure of the parts of the nervous system that coordinate movement. Retaining little physical control of his body or eyesight, Jarman applied the thick layers of paint with his hands and used his fingers to inscribe 'Ataxia – AIDS is Fun' in the paint. By including the image of the painting, Hamilton's portrait visually records Jarman's battle with the physical manifestations of AIDS, as well as capturing his state of mind at the time. Further, the instinctual reaction to squint in an effort to refocus the hazy silhouette of Jarman lends vicarious eyes to the viewer, affording them a glimpse into the world through the eyes of the blind artist.

Artificially composed and layered on top of one another, the images seem not to coexist. The blurred image of Jarman, separate from his surroundings, visually asserts the fact that all humans are in movement, unfixed. Through the static nature of the background, created by the flat image of the painting, we are reminded that we are the ones leaving and coming, not the world around us, or the worlds we create. With the Polaroid the artist is able to approximate a real moment in time. This cursory glance and unprompted photograph became a final memory and a lasting image of Jarman, who was taken by his deadly disease in 1994.

Conversely, Saul Fletcher employs Polaroid photography to capture a controlled and intentionally focussed moment in his own life. *Untitled #212 (S/P Saul)* is part of a larger photographic series in which Fletcher utilises the format of Polaroid in order to capture isolated factions of life. The small scale of the Polaroid requires the viewer to approach the work with greater proximity in order to interpret the minute details of the photograph's impressions. Coaxing the viewer into the alienated world of the artist, the small black and white self-portrait shows not a blurred image of the artist but psychological nebulosity. Whereas Hamilton's image draws attention to the physical limitation of the human body, Fletcher's diverts the viewer's attention away from his physical presence and towards the fragility of the human mind. Yet, in many ways, the vulnerability of body reflected in Fletcher's positioning illuminates the artist's inability to convey a true sense of self.

In the context of an exhibition that investigates how artistic identity is inextricably linked to the process of image-making, the use of Polaroid elicits a profound contemplation of this relationship. The desire to harness a moment of life, capture a true

experience or convey a person's character informs an artist's choice of medium as much as his artistic practice. Similar to a Polaroid, [Frank Auerbach's](#) process is in many ways equally time based. In an attempt to defeat the passing of time by capturing an experience, Auerbach will scrap a canvas clean, or destroy an etching if he feels the work has not conveyed an accurate representation of his subject in a single sitting.

Many of the works in the exhibition expose the process of creation as evidence of truth or an edifice of reality. In contrast, Polaroid photography eliminates the process nearly altogether. Instantly produced with the push of a button, the Polaroid almost entirely eradicates traces of the artist's hand. As a real-time medium, the Polaroid appeals to the artist through its capacity to capture the fleeting occurrences of life. While both artists use this to their advantage, they have in fact presented the viewer with constructed images. In doing so, Hamilton's retouched and superimposed photographic expression and Fletcher's still and staged image actually contradict the immediacy of the medium.

As a medium, Polaroid has the ability to breathe life into an image. The visual 'truth' produced by the Polaroid engenders candor, spontaneity and playfulness. As instantaneous analogs of the present, Polaroid images succeed in immortalising a true experience and will always require the here and there, thus forcing a momentary focus on the moments in between.