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## No Heroes Outside: Broomberg & Chanarin's 'Bandage the knife not the wound'

**Broomberg & Chanarin**

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Upon first impression, the Broomberg & Chanarin exhibition at the Goodman Gallery in Johannesburg is one that will likely elicit the annoyed response commonly reserved, by even the most weathered of art audiences, for the type of contemporary art that relies on an untraditional art medium.

For this exhibition, the artists used Ultraviolet printing (an early method of photographic printing developed in the 19th century), producing works of art using a Ben-Day dot silkscreen-type aesthetic, and juxtaposing multiple forms of a selected image. Significantly these images mostly rely on cardboard as its 'canvas.' The use of pop art aesthetics and cardboard makes these works seem frivolous at first glance.



Broomberg & Chanarin Untitled 9, 2018. UV print on cardboard

I was guilty of responding with a jaded eye, having expected something somewhat different from these two well-known artists (concurrently exhibiting at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris). It didn't take me long to do my first trip around the exhibition and consider dismissing it as uninteresting – but I eventually realized that I was intentionally being presented with some seemingly banal images, on an even more banal medium, and that I hadn't given it enough consideration.

Broomberg & Chanarin have a history of working with text alongside the image. They are not only artists that experiment with photography as a medium, but they are archivists, historians, academics, and detectives. They weave together narratives across time and place through the found image, and there is a profound method of questioning accompanying an odd sense of nostalgia in their work.

The cardboard surface, and the potential vulnerability of UV printing on this material made for disposal, lends itself well to what the artists are trying to convey to their audience. The disposability of the medium lives in contrast with our lust after the idea of art as the immutable relic of human intellectual experience.

Artists have worked with disposable or untenable media since the first human painted on a rock. Newspaper, out-of-date books, walls of dilapidated buildings – nothing is immune to being drawn into the fold as ground. But somehow, seeing such cleanly printed works on such cleanly cut card makes it a different ball game. The medium has presence in this space, unframed, and bent as a used box might be, it's obviously important. It's more than a poke at the value placed on art in the commercial market. It's examining the core of how equally disposable content, and with it, human history, has become in the digital age. Somehow using such tactile display forms, and archaic printing methods, serves to highlight the contrast it holds to the current modus operandi. We'll never again be confronted with Anne Frank's diary, just maybe an old tumblr account, or an archived website from the late 1990s dedicated to the 'dancing baby.' There is something so anti-memetic about displaying overprinted photography on cardboard, which speaks volumes about the artists' intentions.



Broomberg & Chanarin Untitled 6, 2018. UV print on cardboard

The Goodman Gallery writes in its blurb about the artists that, 'Over one trillion images were produced in the world last year.' But this seems like a lowball estimate, considering how many people in the world have phones or cameras now. The calculation works out to approximately 130 images produced per person in the world per year. It's overwhelming trying to imagine a trillion of anything, never mind the dizzying notion of more than a trillion photos entering the digital sphere annually. As an archivist, or a historian, it seems pointless to even try to comprehend how humans will deal with understanding this amount of content in future. Perhaps it will all be lost along with our ability to use the technology to see the digital, and what will remain is the cardboard.

Presenting alternative histories by creating more content, means that there are more alternate interpretations, and therefore understandings of, not only events, but all of human experience. This is a very overwhelming idea. A liberating one, but in its vastness it feels paralyzing. It seems like Broomberg and Chanarin deal with these ideas in the use of medium, and by isolating such a comparatively small number of images, it stands in contrast to the digital.

It probably says a lot about the show that I have found it near impossible to pick one or two particular works, or series of prints, to present as examples for analysis and description. The images flow into one another, zoomed in bits and pieces of humans from historically important images. Importantly the photos used encapsulate 'the [small handful of] images that remain meaningful' to the artists themselves in this world where the image has become so readily produced by anyone.



Broomberg & Chanarin  
Untitled 28, 2018  
UV print on cardboard

Broomberg and Chanarin's attempt at narrowing down their selection, and their use of medium somehow convey the futility of their exercise, and emphasize that in some existentially depressing way we have rendered our record of history and our human experience unmanageable because now we are all recording. This most democratic form of writing history deprives us of heroes outside of ourselves.

The thing that I love about art is that, unlike most things, we get to read into it ad infinitum. We can interpret what the artists intended, or what we perceive for ourselves, but most of all, it

provokes thought, and although no one work stands out on this exhibition as particularly special, it's left me thinking about the dilemma it presents constantly over the past weeks, and I suspect that, as a historian, this contemporary dilemma of information overload is going to haunt me, and my own sense of relevance, forever.