

Untitled Art: Damien Schumann and 'Face It: The Stigma Exhibition'

Article by Molly Dierks

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When I began writing about Damien Schumann, a noted photographer and graduate of the prestigious Ruth Prowse School of Art working out of Cape Town, South Africa, I was going through some pretty momentous changes, and my introduction to him was a bit of serendipity that both transformed me and made me more of who I am. This, amazingly, is what Damien's work in his most recent photography installation, 'Face It: The Stigma Exhibition', is all about.

Damien Schumann admits that though he makes a living as a photographer, his work and lifestyle defy category. He has been called an activist, artist, philanthropist, and anthropologist, but he is not overly concerned with titling. This freedom from the stricture of labeling is the central thesis of 'Face It', which uses photography as a means of addressing nine conditions defined by stigmatization.

Schumann's past work documenting disease (Tuberculosis and AIDS) has led him to conferences with such global heavyweights as the World Health Organization and UNAIDS, where he presents the installations in order to change legislation surrounding disease. Art here functions as a window into the personal and emotional lives of people surrounded by disease, content that is often absent from international meetings with a tendency to focus on biomedical facts and figures.

However, 'Face It' is an exhibition that deals with stigma and living conditions surrounding issues including, but not limited to disease, from homosexuality and drug addiction to anorexia. The exhibition is less pointed; less about spreading awareness of conditions that are undeniably terrible, and more about inspiring individual contemplation. Though Schumann perceives stigma as something that divides us, what he presents in 'Face It' is a sense of what unites us: the characteristics, both beautiful and terrible, and most importantly, universal, to our species.

The artist's method of dealing with installation contributes to the brilliance of the work by highlighting its ambiguous qualities, which are also its main strength. Abstraction in 'Face It' is an element that reinforces, rather than weakens, its impact.

Before entering the venue, one hears a cacophony of voices that mimic the static noise created by immersion in a crowd, and 9 plinths with headphones stand at attention, each a platform for a book that lacks a title. The sound is element a deft introduction to work that questions the notion of how we survive by disallowing information that could

disrupt or challenge our sense of self.

As for books and podiums, the artist decidedly avoided hanging pictures in a typical gallery maneuver because the work is about participation, not show. The wear and tear of the photographic content, and thus the books' life cycle references their use, and therefore their impact. The message is clear if you choose to take it; in order to actualize ourselves, we must first gain acceptance of who we are. With each showing of the 'Face It' series, the work's effectiveness manifests itself physically.

Though the invitation to explore is obvious, the anonymity of the subjects offsets a too pointedly utilitarian construct. The sounds in the headphones are those of the artist and a subject, but the conversational train floats in time while the photography avoids referencing specific locations. No faces are shown; the effort of capturing the abstraction of prejudice is dealt craftily by turning the mechanical eye of the camera to the environment in which subjects are living, rather than on the subjects themselves. But instead of focusing on poverty, filth, or other environmental conditions that might evoke distance through pity or judgment, what is revealed are the most mundane and innocent of actions.

This gradual and detached method of presenting that nevertheless demands physical involvement is Mr. Schumann's way of gently forcing the viewer to look at the world and its people, really look without naming. It is terrifying subject matter handled in the gentlest way possible. Without knowing where we are or who we are looking at, all of the typical situations in which stigma arise melt away and we are placed in the same position Mr. Schumann was in when the photographs were taken; talking as one person to another, without judgment. This is the beauty and ultimate brilliance of the 'Face It' series.

Aesthetic abstraction in the series also functions to demonstrate the artist's working philosophy which is centered on intuition, not logic. In order to complete the body of work presented in 'Face It', Damien formed relationships with people through various connections, friendships and natural occurrences, and over time, as they became comfortable with him, began to take pictures and interview them about the way they chose, or did not choose, to live their lives. The gradual awakening to subject matter serves both as evidence of and an encouragement to adopt a more intuitive method of exploring the world. The lack of ability to explain is what breaking down stigma is about, both tangentially and centrally.

While Schumann's work is emotional and ambiguous, it continues to function as a very real catalyst for change. In fact, the artist has recently returned from a trip to Mexico City, where he presented portions of the 'Face It' series (dealing with disease) to world leaders at the 39th Annual International Aids Society Conferences. The work itself, its presentation, its method of creation, its subject matter, and use are consistent with his AREA of working; Schumann's own acronym standing for advocacy, research, education, and awareness. This philosophy of human interaction and exploration is as significant as what is presented in exhibition.

'Face It: The Stigma Exhibition' reflects a generous nature that encourages us to look within instead of without, through the simple act of engaging our curiosity and taking the steps to flip through a book with no title and no faces. Beautiful work that can only come from the most honest place, that place that exists without words, where knowing and seeing and feeling are the same. Looking through the amazing and amazingly difficult interviews with subjects, I began to wonder; what would life be like if we just listened to the inside? How would our collective experiences change and in what ways would we open to one another? These questions are essential to life, and if you are even mildly interested in answering them 'Face It: the Stigma Exhibition' is something to look out for.

To find out more about Damien Schumann and his work, please visit

www.dspgallery.com

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