

At the 2023 Turbine Art Fair in Johannesburg, I was struck by the art of the South African, Hannalie Taute. The trick was simple, the effect potentially resonant. Using old black and white family photographs as her foundation, some personal, others sourced from bric-a-brac shops, some blown up beyond their initial format, Taute proceeds to embroider masks over the faces of the figures. Is this an erasure, or a further illumination? What can we know, when nothing is effectively hidden? If the face concealed is significant, then why? What binds us to the ephemerality of a face? As Taute notes, she primarily works with 'the captured image' – captured by her, the photographer? Where does the snare begin and end? Certainly, Taute is directly addressing the interface of Africa and colonialism, an embattled white sovereignty, for what the embroidered masks precisely reveal is the uncertainty of place and being, self-knowledge and its evacuation, self-presence and its absence. As such, her artworks – a mix of the photographic image, rubber inner tube inlays, embroidery – are, for Taute, sutures, 'a restitching of historical narrative of sorts', a 'surrealism of conflicting customs and tradition', inherently dissonant and asymmetric, which the artist further amplifies and aggravates.

That said, Taute also intuitively an evolution in which dissonant cultural histories can interpenetrate. This is the thrust of James Clifford's ethnographic premise concerning surrealism and collage, in which acculturated identities are mutually estranging yet coterminous. For as Taute further adds, 'These portraits by losing their identities, have the chance to become something different'. As to what that difference might be? If Taute provides no clarity, it is because it is impossible to predict the outcome of what, in the West, has long been perceived as a profane synergy, as irresistible as it is unlovable, to quote J.M. Coetzee. Taute does address the predictive contrast between Europe and Africa – 'a society based on precise rule alongside an extreme nature' – but this merely reproduces an error-stricken dichotomy. For as I have pointed out, there is no ground, given our contaminated inheritance, to suppose such a neat contrast anymore. When Kurtz cries, 'civilize the brutes', it is in fact not clear as to whom he is referring – himself? His tribe? Or another? The genius of Conrad's novel, *Heart of Darkness*, lies precisely and aggravatedly in the slippage of meaning, its metaphoricity, which the English Liberal Humanist critic, F.R. Leavis, abhorred, precisely because it refuted the privative and false divisions punted by imperial power. It is this slippage, this imbalance, which gives Taute's art its corrosive and peculiarly mortal veracity.

We have grown accustomed to the realization that photographs conceal far more than they can ever reveal, that, in effect, photography is an exercise in futility, and all the more poignant because of it. Nothing is ever held, ever contained. Modernism and its innovations – in this case photography – operate in excess of its presumptions and applications. In Taute's case the spectrality of beings more inexistent than existent is eerily and uneasily salutary. The masks are gaudily embroidered, at odds with the monochromatic sigh that is the photographed human form. The dissonance is palpable, the rupture the point. Taute's is a concussive threaded truth. It is not the displacement that matters, the assumption of non-belonging, but, on the contrary, the integrality of white bodies in black Africa. Taute experiences no 'cultural cringe', no doubt of the fact of perplexity – that we cannot know our place in the world, and that is precisely why we remain ever-shifted, shiftless, incapable of holding a pose, being present in the moment we are abducted. The mask is an objective correlative for this abduction – one that is inevitable and inescapable, though immensely troubling nonetheless, as evinced by the West's utter incapacity to reconcile its relationship with Africa. The ensuing deceit, or the pathetic haplessness of it all, merely reveals its own impenetrability. So much for Reason against the Unnamable.

Some might see morbidity in Taute's art, I do not. Rather, it is the complicitous interface of radical differences in medium, form, consciousness, that allows for a highly engaging aesthetic. As Susan Sontag notes, 'The limit of photographic knowledge of the world is that, while it can goad conscience, it can, finally, never be ethical or political knowledge. The knowledge gained through still photographs will always be some kind of sentimentalism, whether cynical or humanist'. As such, photographs are inherently kitsch, or less derisively, fallacious longings. This is because, as a haunting, it is hollow, lacks self-possession, any governing animus. However, when supplemented with an embroidered mask, when physically punctured-and-punctuated through, looped backwards and forwards with a sonorous luminous thread, they become enlivened, galvanized, animated. This was also Picasso's apprehension, which is why, starting with his portrait of Stein, his faces and bodies never again comport with a mimetic consensus, why they disrupt the illusion of wholeness, or composure, why they are wracked with an energy as incomprehensible as it is formally wanton. That Robert Hughes should acknowledge Cubism to be one of the greatest intellectual-aesthetic innovations, yet fail to see its connection to Africa remains puzzling. Perhaps he was a craven colonial aspirant after all, a thinker who cared less for his refracted and displaced origin – the goyim from the South Pacific – than for his elevation and installation as a man of letters in New York? Perhaps. In the case of Taute, in Africa in 2023, there is no doubt of a complicitous dialogue between Africa and the West, modernism and colonialism, and the immense promise that perversity possesses.