A History: Joachim Froese

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Skulls have been abundant in recent art, both in Australia and in the broader international scene. It seems death and mortality have become *trés chic* and many artists are ready to include a bone or two in their work. Amid all of this Joachim Froese has toiled in his studio, consistently and painstakingly creating multi-panelled photographic tableaux *memento mori* from both an historical and personal perspective. Yet in his work there isn't a skull in sight. Well, at least not the human kind should one choose to be picky.

Froese's work is certainly attractive in appearance and technically very proficient. As is the case in the art that inspires him, the iconography on display in *Still Life: Joachim Froese Photographs 1999-2008* is imbued with metaphor. His work is firmly rooted in a classical European vernacular and his interiors are indeterminate places, even non-places. The imprecise background is symptomatic of a sense of dislocation, a common sensation for migrants and one that Froese seems to have experienced – his own life has been split between his birth country of Canada, his childhood years in Germany and his subsequent life in Australia. How do you sort through such a combination of cultures and locales to find a sense of place? Simple: you remove virtually all references to place, working towards a broader scope.

Taking such an approach, Froese follows his heart and heritage in Europe. Throughout history, the figure of Jesus has been portrayed as a gentle character, so a mouse may be an apt metaphor. Similarly Pontius Pilate is often considered a nasty, heartless tough-guy, so he's cast as a hippopotamus and his goons as alligators. (Both are dangerous beasts: in Africa hippos kill more people than lions.) Like an old western movie, the characters are defined through stereotypes. Welcome to the world of *Species* (2005), a series that revisits one of the largest and, some would argue, the most important genres of art history, that of biblical stories and allegory. But rather than the sombre and heavy-handedness of the past, Froese employs humour and whimsy in his series. The backgrounds are glowing white, shadowless non-places in opposition to the tar-black heaviness of much epic historical Euro art. Froese's architecture is built from sugar cubes, and the toys from his daughter's childhood play the protagonists. Even a cocktail umbrella finds its way into the series, standing in place of Christ's halo. Serious cautionary tales are transformed into fun little dioramas and a sense of nostalgia pervades the imagery, and this is something truly enjoyable about the work. The viewer can take such work as a contemporary update of spiritual and sacred iconography, or take pleasure in the whimsy of such innocent characters.

It is precisely this lightness that mediates Froese's subjects. Childhood toys reappear in the later work *Written in the past* (2007), which once again deals with heavy subject matter. This series, along with *Portrait of my mother* (2006) and *Archive* (2008), is a form of therapy if you will, an outlet for the artist in the healing process following the death of his mother. Along with his daughter's toys, his mother's possessions maintain a personal significance that is very strong for Froese and which can also be appreciated by the audience.

Each of the series has a different mood: *Portrait of my mother* has an almost documentary feel about it, understandable as it was shot while his mother was in hospital battling the late stages of cancer. *Written in the past* is set amid an inky black abyss, with objects positioned upon a non-descript timber plank. Movement is captured; things are fleeting. Aerograms drift down and through the image, and if you look carefully you can just decipher the artist's name and address. There is a quiet, Zen-like

P 46/ *Portrait of my Mother* (detail), 2006, colour photograph; individual image 30 x 35cm, 93 images displayed in one long row, 29m.

THIS PAGE: 1/ *Archive #7*, 2008, 4 archival pigment inkjet prints, 144 x 66.5cm.

2/ *Archive #10*, 2008, 3 archival pigment inkjet prints, 113.5 x 66.5cm.

All images this article of work by Joachim Froese; courtesy the artist and Jan Manton Art, Brisbane.

approach to the series, reinforced by the inclusion of blue-and-white-ware ceramics. These reappear in the most recent of the work, *Archive*, as do piles of his late mother's German language books. The impossible stacks seemingly defy gravity and logic – another apt metaphor, in this instance the effort to truly come to terms with a death in the family.

But all of this is an illusion. While the notion of the truth of photography has been so heavily scrutinised that it seems redundant to raise it in a discussion on contemporary photographic art, it also lies at the heart of Froese's methodology. Over the past decade he has refined and mastered his trademark style of multi-panel, interlinked photographs that one still regards the interconnected scenes as a single moment in time. But Froese shoots each frame individually and very deliberately, later connecting a wide variety of shots into coherent larger images. Trial and error plays its part, as does serendipity, in the slow process of developing the final overall image. Sometimes frames are reversed or even flipped, but this isn't immediately obvious.

All of these images stem from the sizeable body of work that started it all: *Rhopography* (1999-2003), a two-part series including nearly fifty works. The title is derived from the Greek *Rhopos*, meaning trivial objects. These earlier works, all meticulously hand-printed black and white photographs, were mined from the paintings of the Italian and Spanish masters of the Renaissance. His trivial objects – mainly insects and fruit with the occasional fish, are somehow animated within still macro-photography. Beetles seem to battle, butterflies travel through the frames, moths sit in quiet contemplation of each other. Bees and flies linger, even the seeds of melons seem to drift down the freshly cut flesh of fruit. But like all of Froese's work, and indeed all of photography, nothing is alive. In his scenes everything is inanimate, a trick of the eye. Like his former lecturer, photographic artist Marian Drew, Froese exploits the pristine nature of the animal corpses he gathers and poses them in such a manner to conceal signs of death. They are moments captured, but it's just not the moments as presented by Froese.

His creatures and fruit are indeed trivial items in the grander scale of things. So are any given person's collected possessions. This is a commonality linking all of his series and was in many ways what held the show together (the other being Froese's chosen style of presentation).

Included in the exhibition were several of Froese's studio props, including his daughter's figurines as well as books and other objects that were in his mother's possession. Housed in display cases, these items added interest and depth to the exhibition as did the presentation of a video interview with Froese providing some insight into his practice and methodologies.

The exhibition was an interesting overview of Froese's practice over the past decade, but there was simply not enough space to truly do justice to his oeuvre. Unlike some artists working in other media, Froese's creative process is so tightly controlled, and the editing process so integral to production, that he does not create the types of 'hits and misses' that is often a feature of other practitioners. Regardless, *Still Life: Joachim Froese Photographs 1999-2008* is a handsome precursor to a full-scale survey exhibition further along this talented artist's career. ■

Still Life: Joachim Froese Photographs 1999-2008 was curated by Simone Jones and shown at the Queensland University of Technology Art Museum, Brisbane, 4 June to 16 August 2009. Joachim Froese is currently represented in *The state we're in: Contemporary Queensland Photography*, a Queensland Festival of Photography exhibition curated by Gordon Craig and showing at the University of Queensland Art Museum, 29 January to 11 April 2010; also represented are Paul Adair, Camilla Birkeland, Eric Bridgeman, Ray Cook, Marian Drew, Shane Fitzgerald, Mari Hirata, Peter Milne, Maurice Ortega, Martin Smith and Carl Warner: www.artmuseum.uq.edu.au

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