

‘Don’t you think that’s a bit personal?’

Emma Hart’s *Discordia Concors*

Craig Burnett

Such order from confusion sprung,
Such gaudy tulips raised from dung.
Jonathan Swift, ‘The Lady’s Dressing Room’ (1732)

Colours, chaos, bodily fluids: a typical family snapshot.

Look again. Something else is afoot, something subtly weird. Start in the background: a kid’s table, with fat legs and kooky hues, stands on a padded mat in big, bold colours. Next to the table, a doll on its back, red dress framed by a blue square. Just abandoned by a child – or artfully placed? The blue square overlays a green carpet, which sits on top of a patterned rug over yet another rug, this one printed with a cartoonish cityscape for toy cars. There’s dad in the foreground, on his back in a black shirt, purple spoon on his belly, tiny red teacup in his left hand. On the right, mum in a black shirt, a tiny red cup in her left hand. In the middle, baby looks up, spots of snot and saliva glistening on her nose and lips. Mr Tumble gives the thumbs up from the cover of a magazine on the left. It’s just an ordinary family goofing around on a weekend afternoon. But why the dead-eyed glare? Who’s the intruder?

Emma Hart’s *Family Portrait*, one from a series that she started in spring 2016, offers a quick overview of some of the key motifs in her recent work: intimacy, messiness, autobiography, a hint of embarrassment and a touch of performance. Lured into the picture by the psychological tension, we keep looking because of the complexity of tones and patterns – and the sheer familiarity of the subject matter. Other examples of Hart’s *Family Portraits*, mostly shot in Italy while on residency, show her family of three on the beach, having lunch or taking the bus. But they are never alone. The trio stares into the face of an unseen presence. The pictures convey a strange disquiet: what is this omnipresent eye that invades, scrutinizes, importunes? Hart says she started the series of *Family Portraits* in response to winning the Max Mara Art Prize, adjusting to the demands of becoming an artist who, overnight, needed to forge a public persona. In all the portraits, that unified family glare kindles both emotional and pictorial intensity – without it, the picture would be too mundane, just a typical family snapshot. The family stares back at you the viewer, making you – the viewer – the intruder, the invasive eye.

What if the presence were a disembodied camera, jilted and forlorn, sneaking up on the artist to ask: why have you let me go? After all, Hart’s journey as an artist began in the photography department, where she studied the history and theoretical limits of the medium right up to doctorate level. Since 2011, however, while still making use of photography, her work has consisted mostly of multi-media installations that fill entire galleries. With the series of *Family Portraits* she returns to straight – or almost straight – photography. Yet instead of encountering an affectionate old friend, the camera returns as a creepy stalker. Do you mind if I join your family? Can’t we make art together? Surely we’ve still got work to do? The camera

appears out of nowhere, unexpected, casting its hard eye like a vengeful Medusa to paralyze the artist and her family. Maybe the implication here is that the camera doesn't capture moments at all. It kills them.

It was while feeling increasingly frustrated with the limits of photography that Hart came across British philosopher J.L. Austin and his theories of 'performative sentences' or 'performative utterances'. Austin argued against the notion that language passively describes the world. Sentences are not always verifiable as true or false. Certain utterances, he argued, demand or induce an accompanying 'to do': speech implies performance. Hart drew a parallel between the idea that language describes the world more or less unfiltered and an indexical definition of photography, where a photograph gains its force or interest as an objective representation, or trace, of visual experience. Hart adapted Austin's theory and challenged herself to make artworks that correspond to the 'to do' of an Austin 'performative utterance'. She wanted her works, she said, 'to produce not describe. I wanted them to be alive.'¹ If a photograph delivers a glossy depiction, snipped and flattened from a life of constant flux, then Hart sought to create a medium that reflected the texture of experience, or *her* experience, where life is always complex, layered, fragmented, fleshy and funny. Art, she reckoned, must conjure chaotic experience anew, rather than merely describe or represent a past event.

If she wanted photography to perform and artworks to be alive, why not breed cameras with birds to create a range of hybrid beasts, and set them free into a gallery space? This is precisely what she did (with a nod to Austin in the title) for the exhibition 'To Do' (Matt's Gallery, 2011). The show marked Hart's first foray into sculpture, but it was less an assembly of discrete objects than a tangled network of sound and image. Walking into the gallery, you encountered a room of strange beasts: a gaggle of giant camera-birds, talons on tripods, all squawking and snapping away. A total of 27 digital cameras, seven recording live the installation itself, others playing recorded images or videos. Amid the freaky crossbreeds, such as a giant wooden owl with a lens for a beak, there were generic representations of birds too: there a peregrine falcon coolly assesses the exhibition, here a randomly mixed frieze of birds stuck to transparent plastic features a gannet and swan with their wings outspread as if about to embrace. Elsewhere, a clutch of kingfishers sit calmly on a clothes dryer. 'I love birds', offers Hart guilelessly, and in 'To Do' the bird inhabits the space as an innocent, impartial witness. Amid the spindly tripod legs and plastic plumage, a sign read, '1. declare the past is always in 2-D'. And there's her manifesto: Hart didn't want to represent the two-dimensional past: *To Do* conjured a kinetic, ever-changing facsimile of the present.

'To Do' was a vital step for Hart, the playful, animated exhibition where she started to find her voice as an artist, yet an even more important event occurred a year later. While on a residency at Wysing Arts Centre with the artist Jonathan Baldock, she watched him wrap his hands around some wet clay, and tried it herself. Boom: an epiphany of muck. If summoning a gallery full of semi-sentient bird cameras delivered some polyphonic fun, what would happen if you added ceramics? Taking up clay as a medium transformed both Hart's life and her scope and vision as an artist. Anxiety and doubt, both steadfast studio guests of Hart, subside when your hands are full of clay: you become a child-like maker of immediate, fleshy forms. Just as importantly, nothing could be further away from the cool, denuded art of photography than a clod of wet earth. As she sought a new, post-photographic language, the forms and freedoms of ceramics provided the perfect vocabulary.

¹ Quote from Fine Art Talks: Emma Hart at the Royal College of Art, 21 October 2014.