



C U A G STUDIO WATCH SERIES

BETWEEN SELF AND OTHER Chantal Gervais



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Curator

Sandra Dyck

Essay

Andrea Kunard

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Preface

Diana Nemiroff, Director

Chantal Gervais's *Between Self and Other* is the fourth exhibition in the Studio Watch series, inaugurated in 2003. The series, conceived by the Carleton University Art Gallery's curator Sandra Dyck, focuses on new work by a local artist. The emphasis on local practice is reinforced by the choice of a local writer to prepare an essay for the accompanying catalogue – in this instance Andrea Kunard, assistant curator at the Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography and a lecturer in the Art History department at Carleton.

Both Gervais's beautiful but profoundly troubling images of elderly men and women, stripped of all personal histories save what has left its traces on their naked bodies, and Kunard's theoretically informed essay, which views the photographs as an inquiry into what constitutes the human subject in our technocratic society, clearly demonstrate the global reach of contemporary local practice. The body is an important subject in contemporary art and culture worldwide. Gervais exposes what is usually hidden in our culture – the ageing human body. Reduced to the purely corporeal, each of her subjects becomes a *memento mori* – an emblem of mortality. These are transgressive images in a youth-obsessed culture.

I wish to thank both the artist and the author for their thought-provoking work. I am also grateful to the exhibition's curator Sandra Dyck for her expert coordination of all aspects of the project and to Patrick Lacasse for his professional handling and installation of the works.

The Camera Between Self and Other

Andrea Kunard

CHANTAL GERVAIS' PHOTOGRAPHS of the human body raise numerous questions concerning the relation between self and other, and the camera's role in articulating our ambiguous need to both distance ourselves from and connect to the world.¹ Her images are stark in their depiction of the human form; the nakedness of the subjects highlights the body's physicality as well as its vulnerability. The heightened feeling of anxiety many feel when looking at the photographs is in part a product of their rendering of extreme detail; pores, hair, folds of skin, and scars are highly visible. The images both fascinate and repulse, they allude to the body's intricacy and complexity, and in their extreme focus on the physical, are also a reminder of its mortal condition.²

To see depictions of the body in its most fundamental physical state can be a very emotional experience. The works are not overstated in their presentation of the body; instead they appear meditative, more akin to reflections on the physical status of the self. Gervais' photographs both collapse and accentuate the distance felt between self and other. The body, for her, is not the idealized and flawless entity often seen in the media; rather it is a living organism that bears the many marks of life experiences. It survives horrific events, such as serious operations and accidents, and in so doing allows the person who is that physical being to continue to exist. In this sense, the vagaries of existence, its unknown and unpredictable qualities, become "written" on the body.