



Morality Play 2 - 2008 - Oil on canvas - 250 x 200 cm

DEBORAH POYNTON

Memory is what we make of it, and it feels rather unfair to write about someone who's no longer here. I know he would describe our interactions entirely differently.

My friendship with David was founded on a modeling exchange. The evening I met him, I asked him if I could take pictures of him to use in a painting, and he agreed on the condition that he could photograph me.

I call it an exchange, but it was a very strange one. It seemed to me that it lifted the lid on a whole lot of unspoken assumptions we both had about making images, about photography and painting, and about friendship. The mirror of one person's approach seemed to reflect the underbelly of the other's.

For a start, we used photography in totally different ways. I used it to capture an elusive something which I could mediate onto canvas.

I had no interest in photography as an end in itself, only in how it could grab the raw ingredients of the world. David had a great respect for his craft, for everything that came together in that one moment so that the image could spring fully formed into being through him. He exerted a mix of humility and control. Perhaps all artists do that - at its best it is mastership, at its worst, hypocrisy, often a combination. What we shared was the cold camera, which can be penetrative and invasive, often saying more about the taker of pictures than the pictured. He did his utmost to get around that with his eternal questing through the landscape, his stringent practice, careful thought and lifelong dedication. Perhaps an impossible attempt, but I don't think it matters. The symptom of his obsession, the thing that remains - the body of work - justifies itself, offers itself up with its traces of a world that has gone, long past the frail human who was in the grip of its demands.

David said taking a photograph was always like a sexual act for him. I assumed, though I may have been wrong, that he meant that for one moment you actually inhabit the world instead of just looking at it, you penetrate it and consume it.

When I took pictures of him he commented on how much I directed everything until it started to deliver what I was looking for. When he photographed me it was more like a battle he was having with himself, a long, painful time of waiting while he fiddled with tripod, light



Reference photo 26/02/2008

exposure and so on, hidden behind an enormous camera, swearing and getting frustrated, and then taking perhaps four or six very careful, concentrated photographs when the moment was right.

David was a believer in imagery. He was not afraid of depicting the world, with all its freight of meaning. Other people will be writing about that. He was the same generation as my activist father, a believer of a different kind who became an Anglican priest and fought Apartheid, and who died when I was two. I am not a believer in imagery, although I devote my life to it. I am constantly bickering with the trickery of realism. I think it's outrageous to inflict images on others, and I hope to redeem myself by making the paintings time-consumingly beautiful. I think David was hopeful and he had faith. He felt it was important to tell the story of his country, and always tried to allow the meaning and humanity of an image come through.

One particular painting I did of him, "Morality Play 2", surprised him and made him furious. He phoned me from his camper van while driving, to say that he didn't like it and it didn't at all reflect our friendship. I was as surprised as he was, that he was so angry, that he'd expected something and felt let down. I had assumed he would be detached, that I had free rein. It is a painting that is a play on the hubristic nature of image-making itself, a painting really of two image-perpetrators/models locked in a sort of devil's exchange. I may be the only person who

thinks it's funny. Over time, and some emails, he came round and said he realized it wasn't meant to be a direct comment on our friendship. And now I've come round to his point of view. Looking back at it, it probably was an exact representation of our exchange. Or rather it showed the usual joke realism plays on us, it was both representation and complete construction, reality within non-reality ad infinitum.

David took photographs of me at different times, and I liked them a bit, but not that much. For me they were all about who he thought I was, which I suspected was a sort of noble walking-wounded female. I didn't like how it felt to be mediated through his eye. I definitely preferred to be the one making the decisions. Come to think of it, our reactions to each other's depictions were quite similar.

I don't think our ten year friendship really survived our devil's exchange. I am not that interested in photography and he didn't seem that interested in painting. We did talk about real things but there seemed to be an obstruction in the way. Maybe I just wanted a dad, or a co-conspirator. Maybe he wanted a subject, an admirer. Maybe I played stuff out with him as if he really was my father, pretended to be more dismissive of photography than I was, to get his goat. Maybe he wanted to steer me in a better direction, like a misguided daughter.

Once I asked David to take pics of me which I could use in a painting. As usual I chose the



Deborah Poynton by David Goldblatt, to be used as painting reference,
which was never used - 04/09/2007

pose, I chose everything, and he showed me the pics on the camera as we went along so I could adjust something if it wasn't right. But in spite of all of that, they were unusable for painting, I realised afterwards, of course they were. I should never have asked him. They were all David, they were David photographs, not pics at all. I'm including one here. Even though it's just one of the details he took for me to use, it's a finished object, not an ingredient. David was terribly powerful with images.

It was almost like we were too similar and too different. We were both driven and obsessive, we both compensated for who knows what with the endless making of images. But we came at the images from opposite sides and dashed each other's expectations along the way. Maybe when we turned the lens on each other we confronted something unsurpassable that allowed for art, but not life.

At the end of a text he wrote for one of my catalogues, he said "She has claimed to me that she does not paint her life. I don't believe her". This disbelief lies at the heart of our oil-and-water approach to images. David did not like or trust my idea of paradox, that I might both paint, and not paint, my life at exactly the same time. Perhaps he thought it self-deluding, or even worse, cowardly. The problem, was, I could not be an artist if I did not pursue that paradox. Perhaps, I don't know, he could not be the kind of photographer he was if he did.

David was immensely generous, self-centred, enquiring, careful, pedantic, excellent, perceptive, wilfully blind. He was human. I'm very glad I knew him. I think in the end we were both lucky, because we had something to serve, images to make which helped to give us meaning and connection to the world. That was our common, infinitely capacious ground, our holding place.

