Ben Quilty
SHADOWED

Silhouette portraiture became popular during the mid-eighteenth century, hailed as a more affordable alternative to ivory portrait miniatures. Yet this new portraiture emerged alongside a revival in physiognomy, the ancient pseudo-scientific field which asserted that one's appearance, especially facial features, might correspond to particular and innate personality traits. Suited to documenting features in a cold, 'objective' manner, the silhouette was easily absorbed by this field, and became forever entangled with emergent techniques in scientific racism and criminology. Today, the profile is essentially synonymous with the mugshot. Physiognomy, meanwhile, is undergoing yet another revival within the context of computer vision and machine learning.

The interior of a silhouette is of course entirely featureless, the figure shadowed by a hot white background. It withholds information, and is therefore error prone. As a tool of documentation it is therefore a paradox, anatomically precise, yet defined by significant blind spots. The viewer is drawn to the limited clues which might reveal something of the subject, dress, tension and posture, profile. Which details do we dwell on, and which do we neglect? Perhaps more importantly, what is being withheld by the silhouette, by those tracts of canvas which do not possess data? How is it that these absences manage to contribute? At this point we might be reminded of Quilty's long engagement with the Rorschach test. Hermann Rorschach developed his eponymous ink blot tests to draw out the patient's pure subjectivity. His tests did so by being randomised, containing no reference to the actual world, no pre-existing information or meaning. An image from nowhere which would capture vulnerable first impressions. The tests worked (so he claimed) precisely because they created empty space.

In the silhouette and Rorschach, Ben is clearly preoccupied with the optical sciences of human psychology and cognition. Tests, techniques, disciplines and discredited pseudo-sciences which have all too often wielded immense power over individuals and populations. In *Shadowed,* he is swimming further into the unconscious. While Quilty has different intentions and ideas to the physiognomist, they both deal in faces, and pieces of faces. Here, the mouth in particular stands out. Buckteeth, fangs and mandibles are rendered in gouache and ink on paper, charcoal, graphite and oil on canvas. They are deconstructed and cruelly reassembled, he is inventing new expressions, conditions and yes, personalities.

Perhaps the central question then, in *Shadowed*, is the articulation of human difference, whether that be in our mental states or in our appearance. The vacuums and shadows generated by these processes are utilized fully, expressive tools and not accessories to form. Meanwhile, *The Daughter,* a familiar face for the artist, hums with a sickly incandescence, and might have belonged in Laloux's *Fantastic Planet* (1973). In *Facing up* a bald head sits in the gloom like a lost asteroid, stretched, and cold.

Milena Stojanovska 2023