

FrameWork 3/12

Rebecca Duclos on Arnaud Maggs

Arnaud Maggs describes a deceptively simple impetus for his latest series of photographs entitled *After Nadar* currently installed at Susan Hobbs Gallery. As he paged through a book that included Nadar's studio portraits of actor Charles Deburau in character as Pierrot, Maggs knew he would somehow incorporate the poignant poses of the mime into a project of his own. In 2011 he purchased the book and set to work reconsidering and reconstructing Nadar's expressive documentation of the 19th century French pantomime figure. In a rare moment within Maggs' long career, the photographs that resulted from this process place the artist himself at the centre of every image.

After Nadar is, then, a series of ten self-portraits that are autobiographical, but which significantly operate at one remove. In the lower gallery the first nine images show Maggs as *not-Maggs* but, in full costume and whiteface, as a version of Pierrot. Performing a set of actions that directly reference the Toronto artist's career as a photographer—or gesture towards his life as a connoisseur, a collector, a storyteller, a lover—all the poses except for one are personalized departures from Nadar's original series. Maggs' staged vignettes of *Pierrot in love* (the artist holding an armload of pink roses) or *Pierrot the Collector* (Maggs gripping as many of his beloved white metal jugs as his long fingers can hold) give us glimpses into the octogenarian's rich artistic and personal history while also masking (every pun intended) the much more complex set of conditions that surround each and every pose he has chosen to assume. The image *After Nadar: Pierrot receives a letter* (2012) is a case in point: in this photograph, Maggs holds one of the black-banded French mourning envelopes that appeared in his 1996 series *Notification i and ii*. While the image points back to a signature project within the lineage of what Philip Monk has called the "archival works," the notification envelope now in the hands of Maggs himself is unambiguous. As the artist confided recently: "It is me playing with death."

In the series *After Nadar*, Maggs is indeed playing with something—many things, in fact—that we have not seen recently, or perhaps ever, in his oeuvre. Michael Mitchell's recent *Canadian Art* interview with Maggs (Fall 2010) provided a hint that something was changing for the artist. In speaking of his extraordinary 2010 series *The Dada Portraits* that repurposed pages from mid-19th century diagrammatic carpenters' guidebooks as complex line drawings in which figures and faces of the Dadaists could be imagined to appear, Maggs says: "This new work is the most exciting thing I have done in a long time, because I'm not just documenting. It's something else." While Mitchell suggests that Maggs' mind had been "liberated to re-imagine things," it seems that this "something else" was also the ability to locate the precise transitional object that would allow Maggs to collapse together his interest in human portraiture and object portraiture. As a "hinge series," the *Dada Portraits* fused Maggs' fascination with structure and systems with his discernment of form and physiognomy. What emerged were these strange and haunting portraits of people-as-objects-as-people that captivated Maggs' imagination in an entirely new way.



Certainly, if a return to the human figure is notable after two decades of pointing his camera primarily towards objects, Maggs' choice to construct auto-portraits as part of this return is even more surprising. This is no more prominent than in the tenth of the Pierrot portraits shown in the upstairs gallery. *After Nadar: Pierrot Turning* (2012) is comprised of a grid of twelve upper torso shots of Maggs performing his signature 360 degree rotation that is at the same time a nod to Nadar's own 1865 *Revolving Self-portrait*. While the

appreciation of French tradition and culture is ever-present in the artist's works and the subtle homages to both the history of photography and typography are consistently woven into his choice of subject matter, this is perhaps the first time that we see Maggs actually *embodying* these influences directly within his choice of persona and the props Pierrot uses as signifiers of a life lived. It was Gary Michael Dault who once called Maggs a “photo anthropologist” for his exacting studies of the human form in such series as *64 Portrait Studies* (1976-78), the *Ledoyen Series*, *Working Notes* (1979), or *Kunstakademie* (1980). The same anthropological designation could, of course, be applied to the artist's equally exacting study of material culture as seen in such series as *Répertoire* (1997), *Aux Ciseaux d'Argent* (1999), *Werner's Nomenclature of Colours* (2005), or *Lessons for Children* (2006). What is so intriguing about *After Nadar* is how Maggs chooses to pose himself for the camera in this astonishing series and the precision (and delight) with which he selects the exact objects—archival boxes, antique books, an instrument, *vides-greniers* finds—that will reveal certain aspects of his character to the eyes of the discerning onlooker.

If this is Maggs the elder anthropologist at work now studying his own life in the public eye, we must necessarily acknowledge the unmistakably “retrospective” feel of *After Nadar*. Although compact, this tightly focused exhibition at Susan Hobbs has enough poetic power to presage and even pre-empt the extensive



survey exhibition of Maggs' work that will open at the National Gallery of Canada in May of this year. It is for this reason that at least one more of *After Nadar's* quiet resonances is worth noting. For art historians such as Rosalind Krauss, Nadar's 1855 suite of images entitled *Expressions of Pierrot: A Series of Heads* (the original stimulus for Maggs), was more than simply an experiment in photographic portraiture or a document of a well-known mime artist in mid-19th century Paris. It was, rather, a lesson in gestural and spectral trace-making and a celebration of the two “technologies” of mime and photography that each had their own way of registering and aestheticising the physiognomic trace. This is particularly apparent, suggests Krauss, in Nadar's image of Pierrot with a camera—the one pose that Maggs faithfully reproduces in his image *After Nadar: Pierrot the Photographer* (2012). Of this particular stance assumed by Debureau (and Maggs 150 years later), Krauss, in her *October* essay “Tracing Nadar” (Summer 1978), writes:

On the first level we confront a performance of reflexivity in which the mime doubles in the roles of photographer and photographed. Posing alongside the camera, he weaves that peculiar figure of consciousness in which the line that connects subject and object loops back on itself to begin and end in the same place. The mime enacts the awareness of watching himself being watched, of producing himself as the one who is watched (45-46).

This observation is especially poignant for Maggs whose Pierrot portraits are filled with the literal and symbolic traces of his profession and his private obsessions. In *After Nadar*, the artist uses personas, poses, and objects to actively “produce” a self—to create a photographic “performance of reflexivity”—that loops the subject and the object together for the first time in a silent theatre of the artist's own making. Arnaud Maggs, in *After Nadar*, has indeed produced himself as the consummate watcher who is now, finally, the one who is watched.