

Simon Obarzanek

“My work is generally much more about my state than it is about the sitters”

SIMON OBARZANEK has gained a significant reputation for his conceptually driven and often strangely unnerving photographs that explore the expressive potential of the human form. His early work was primarily concerned with portraiture but, more recently, he has withdrawn from close-ups of faces to depictions of the human figure in space. Earlier this year Obarzanek's work was the subject of a major survey exhibition at Melbourne's Monash Gallery of Art. The show featured four of the artist's most significant photographic series, including *80 Faces*, a compelling sequence of 80 black-and-white portraits, and *Untitled Movement No. 1*, a more recent series of dramatic colour photographs of faceless human figures in suspended movement, now on show at the 2008 Melbourne Art Fair. INTERVIEW: Ashley Crawford

Is Obarzanek a Polish name?

Yes. My parents came to Australia from Poland in 1958 and then spent seven years on a kibbutz in Israel, where I was born.

Untitled Movement No. 1 (2006–08) is your most recent work. What was the inspiration for the series?

The inspiration came from seeing the different movements and postures of people in the street – carrying shopping, stumbling, leaning, reaching. Some of the movements suggested joy or ecstasy, but I was most drawn to those that conveyed contemplation, severity and weight. To me the movements are representative of a more general human state. There's no distinct narrative in the photographs, but rather a series of small movements – a sense of being pulled along by the force of gravity.

The lighting is particularly dramatic. How did you stage the shots?

A set was purpose-built outside and then studio lighting was mixed with daylight. Initially the lighting was less theatrical, but I found that the resulting pictures didn't have the strength of the real-life movements. The energy was lost when the movement was frozen in time and out of context. I had to find a way to get the right feeling across and more dramatic lighting was the solution.

How did you find the subjects for your portrait series *80 Faces* (2002–06)?

Most of the subjects are people I encountered in the street: at train stations, shopping centres, agricultural shows – anywhere where people gather in numbers. I seem to find all of my projects on the street.

Are the photographs manipulated?

No. The only “manipulation” was that I asked the sitters to pose wearing either a black t-shirt or a singlet with the straps pulled down.

The subjects' faces are incredibly individualistic. Was that your intention?

No. My intention was to use the faces purely as physical surfaces. But – as I soon discovered – when you use faces as your raw material it's impossible to suppress the individuality of each subject.

Were the photographs of Diane Arbus an inspiration for the *80 Faces* series?

Not really. I simply felt a strong connection to particular faces that I encountered in the street. The documentary-style structure of the series was inspired by the work of [German photographers] Bernd and Hilla Becher, particularly their photographs of industrial facades, gas towers and mine shafts. The actual content of the series was probably inspired by some of the writers I read as a young man – such as Albert Camus, Hermann Hesse, Rainer Maria Rilke, Dostoevsky and Nietzsche. I guess there could be a connection with Diane Arbus's photographs of freaks – they have such a human quality to them that I hope my faces have too. But Arbus's work is more about the individual while mine is about a general human state.

What inspired the series *Singers* (2005–07)?

I was walking through the city one day and came across a barbershop choir performing in a public space. I instantly engaged with their contorted faces; I'd rarely seen such passion and emotion. Their expressions were so unusual, with their skin pulled tightly in all directions over the bones of their faces. I wanted to document what I'd seen and felt; to communicate a passion for life through these faces. Often ideas don't translate very well, but I'm really happy with this series – it expresses exactly the amazement I felt when I first encountered the singers.

For the series *10pm – 1am* you took photographs of girls outside nightclubs.

The images have a wonderful ambiguity. Can you tell us about this series?

The pictures were taken before the girls entered the nightclubs; they were generally happy and excited to be where they were. The pictures were taken over two years outside two nightclubs. My process relies heavily on casting. I'd seen thousands of faces and figures so this series is really about the figures I finally chose. My work is generally much more about my state than it is about the sitters.

Your work is incredibly varied. Do you deliberately set out to challenge yourself with each series?

Yes. When a project becomes predictable I lose the impetus to continue. The process starts to feel re-hashed. That's when I start working on something new – when I have no idea whether an idea will work or not. I set up a structure for each project, but I leave enough space for chance to play a very large role. Predictability in my process drains my energy and usually leads to forced, uninteresting work.

In his catalogue essay for your recent exhibition at Monash Gallery of Art, Stephen Zagala identifies a sense of mortality in your work. Do you agree?

I think so. I contemplate my own mortality all the time. And my work is a direct reflection of my state of mind, so I guess the theory holds true.

Finally, if you could live with any work of art ever made, what would it be?

One of Sol LeWitt's 100 Cubes drawings or one of Eva Hesse's 1966 series of concentric circle drawings in ink wash and pencil.

melbourne art fair

Simon Obarzanek at Karen Woodbury Gallery, Stand A65



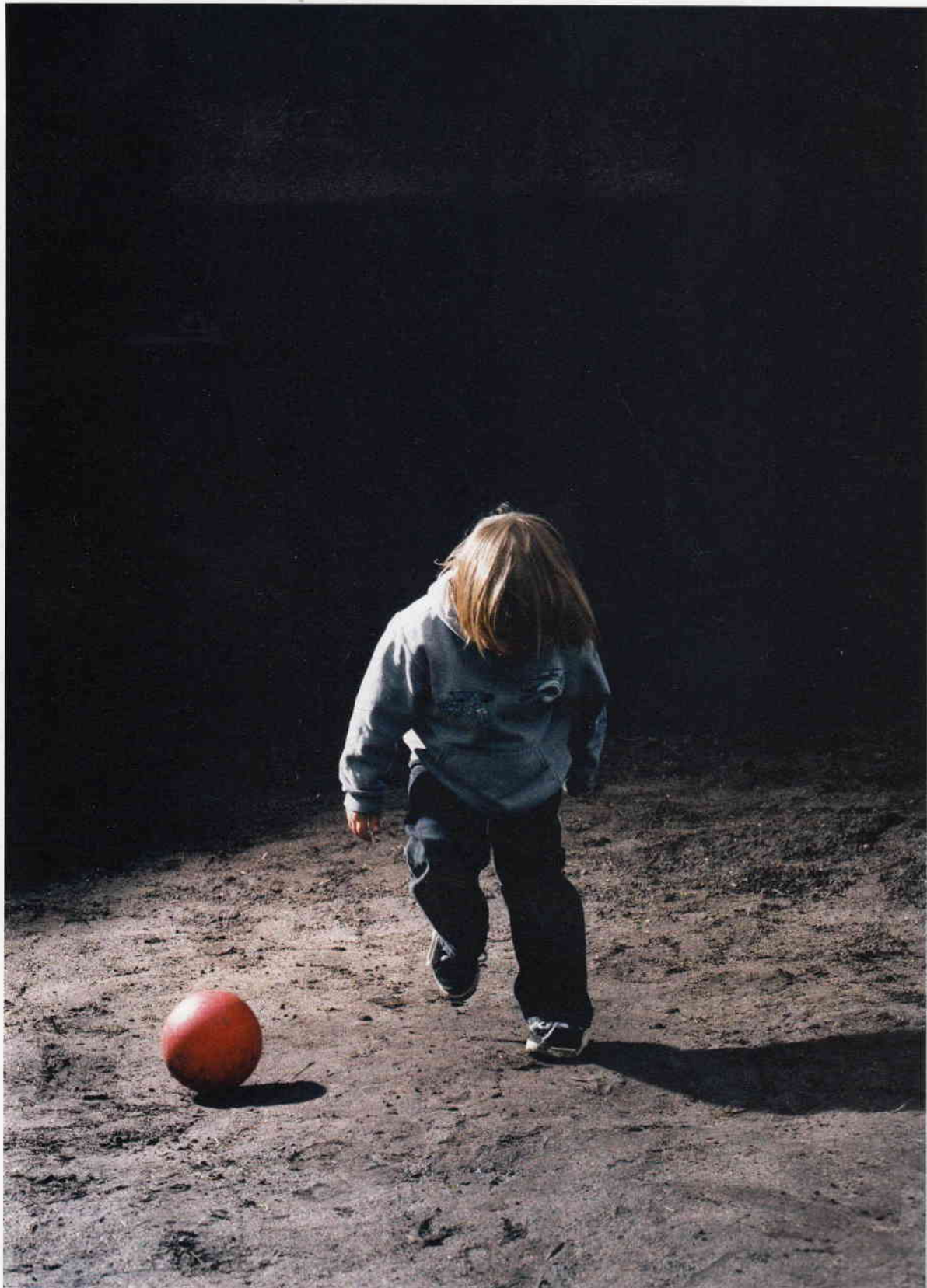
1 *80 Faces*, #40 (2002–06), silver gelatin photograph, 32.5 x 24.5cm

2 *Singers*, #3 (2005–07), type-C photograph, 102 x 76cm

3 *10pm – 1am*, #5 (2006–07), type-C photograph, 102 x 76cm



Born: 1968, Israel Studied: Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, Melbourne Lives and works: Melbourne Represented: Karen Woodbury Gallery, Melbourne



Untitled Movement No. 1, #3 (2006–08), type-C photograph, 60 x 50cm



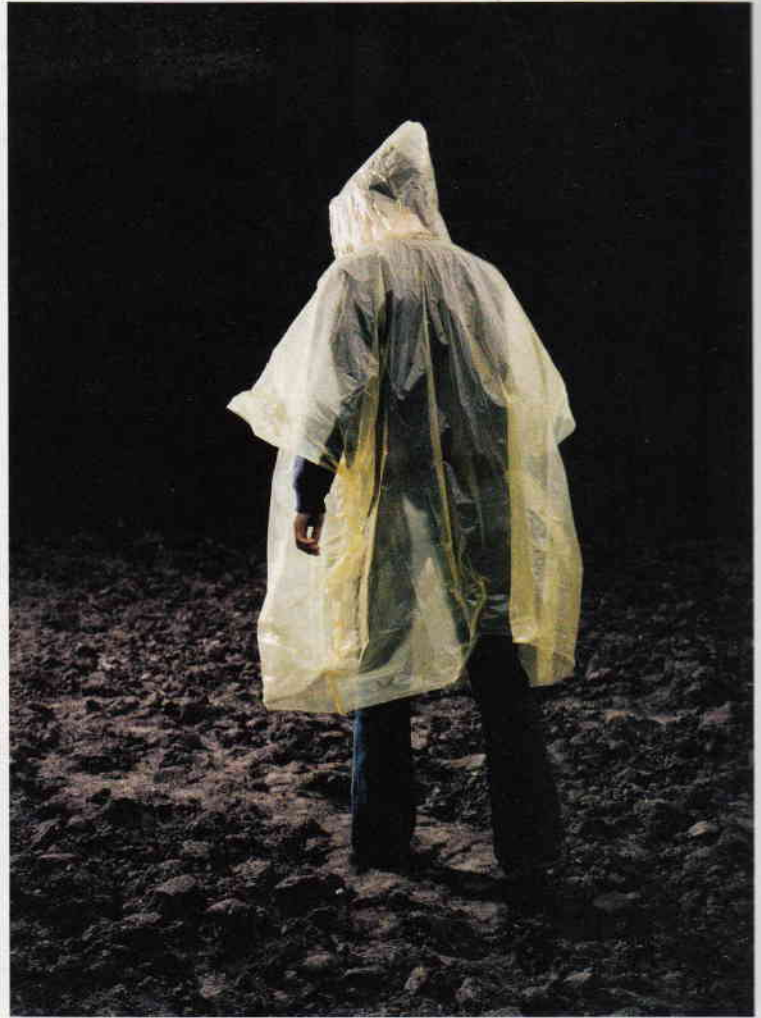
Untitled Movement No. 1, #6 (2006–08), type-C photograph, 60 x 50cm



Untitled Movement No. 1, #9 (2006–08), type-C photograph, 60 x 50cm



Untitled Movement No. 1, #10 (2006–08), type-C photograph, 60 x 50cm



Untitled Movement No. 1, #1 (2006–08), type-C photograph, 60 x 50cm