

Love? I make it often, but I never talk about it.

Mademoiselle Leroi in Marcel Proust Remembrances of things past

Searching for love and yearning to be loved are eternal human conditions with universal consequence. Love swells our hearts, shaping our lives and who we become. Its affect is profound. Of course it's not just about sex. If only it were always possible to be as brisk as Mademoiselle Leroi in her decisive separation of sex and love about an emotion that we cannot escape, although can certainly sublimate, avoid and even discard. Love isn't easy. And Darren Sylvester, like all of us, knows this only too well. For this exhibition Sylvester's frame of reference is the mutually reciprocal notion that to love well is to know of lost love. This romantic idea continues the artist's thematic exploration of longing and desire and the potential for human relationships and meaningful interaction in contemporary life.

Sylvester's pristine and cool images are none-theless a heartfelt vision of the world. People engaged in everyday occurrences are elevated, by virtue of the artist's technique, into the realms of pictorial beauty. His directorial style is to orchestrate scenarios at times distilled from short stories he has written. Condensed and resonant titles act as gateways to unfurl meanings which can be surprising and touching. In fact many of the titles of his photographs lend universality to personal experiences by transforming the particular into metaphysical statements, sometimes truisms, about life and living. A silhouette of someone speaking on a glowing mobile phone and looking out over a night-time cityscape, for example, is entitled Faceless, Anonymous and Nothing. Here, the figure dominates the composition which belies the title. Yet the anonymity of life in a big city or indeed of the individual situated within a global environment is sustained and reinforced by the title of the work.

In this image and others the signs of modern technology – mobile phones, laptops, ipods – are obvious. Modern communication such as using email or mobile phones is immediate but also remote and the parties involved may be estranged from or even unknown to each other. Sylvester's images deal with the delicate nuances of this contemporary conundrum. We'll never know what is being said in Faceless, Anonymous and Nothing or the reason why the young woman has stayed on her bed from daylight into darkness in Humans Evolve to Be Completely New and Humans Evolve to Break and Disappear, although we can certainly guess. In contrast, Dead Mice, twin-sets of computer mice cast in bronze which rest on their sides or back, cleverly and metaphorically embody the paradox of communication. The 'mouse' is a user-friendly object that specifies openness but is here devoid of connectivity because the 'tail' has been cut off. The mice are literally 'dead' weight.

Despite the overarching theme of lost love, Let Hopes and Dreams Be Things We Can Achieve is a work of positive expectation. A couple wearing matching yellow parkers stand hand in hand within a majestic alpine landscape of snow-tipped mountains. The gesture of holding hands shows intimacy and care. The pair is dwarfed by their surroundings but this is one of those magic moments you experience when travelling with friends or loved ones.

Sylvester's work blends experience with imagination to represent the complex and sophisticated nature of communication and relationships in the present day. His images are a strange mix of intimacy and anonymity. It is in the carefully inscribed ambiguity of title and image that his work asks fundamental questions about human perception and awareness: Where do I fit in? What do I want? Will I love someone like that again? There are no clear answers to these kinds of questions. Meaning is found in the pleasure, and often poignant reluctance, of questioning.

Natasha Bullock

Assistant curator, Photography and Contemporary Art,
Art Gallery of New South Wales