

Heart

Sanell Aggenbach

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The press release for *Familia Obscura*, Sanell Aggenbach's twelfth solo show, opens with a quote from Luc Tuymans. His words go on to pepper the subsequent text. It's an interesting correlation of practices and arguably the two artists sit quite comfortably side by side. Both are primarily painters, both are known for drawing methodically upon historical narratives, both make use of equally muted palettes and both are happily wedded to their coolly elliptical conceptual approaches. But that is where the similarity ends: where Tuymans' work is unmistakably sterile, Aggenbach's production is anchored by human feeling.

Familia Obscura, located at BRUNDYN+'s imposing new exhibition space in the Bo-Kaap, is Aggenbach at her best. Equal parts humorous and haunting, the exhibition reads like an intimate glimpse into a family album complete with ultrasounds, pet portraits and holiday pics. Despite their photographic source material, these snapshots are far from exacting reproductions of reality. Take the massive domestic animal paintings 'Eddie Schwarz' and 'Somewhere in Between', a rabbit and a dog respectively. Rendered in Aggenbach signature soft focus, each subject is more an absence than a presence, fraying at the edges like a half-recalled memory. They gaze out of the picture plane with sad eyes.

This elusive, dream-like quality, and the sense of loss embedded within it, is carried through into the artist's human subjects. The monotype 'Water's Edge', loosely depicting a figure on a jetty, is barely figurative at all. Form is suggested by a lack of substance - a kind of inversion of the silhouette - in which the surrounding space is somehow more corporeal than the figure itself. 'Water's Edge no 2' pushes this

vanishing act further. Aggenbach has reprinted the same image with even less ink in a moment of 'unmaking' that plays with notions of the original photograph's indexicality.

In interrogating the gap between representation and reality, Aggenbach's images are a monument to the failure of memory as much as an archive. Even her mixed media works, shattering the fourth wall between flat image and viewer, seem less than concrete. 'Rapture', a still life on printed canvas, dissolves into an effusion of rayon thread as though unable to hold onto its own solidity, its truthful representation of an object in the real world.

True, the treachery of these images en masse - the very unstable surfaces that make them visually exciting - can become a little emotionally exhausting. I am reminded of opening up an album of family photographs only to discover that, stored in a damp cupboard, they had simultaneously faded and decayed. There's a sense of betrayal that accompanies a suddenly unreliable memory, something disconcerting and uncomfortable. But therein lies the power of *Familia Obscura*. Tuymans' once announced, "I don't want to make portraits on a psychological level. I take all the ideas out of individuality and just leave the shell, the body." Aggenbach takes away the body and just leaves the heart.

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Sanell Aggenbach,
Eddie Schwarz, 2013.
Oil on canvas, 1660
x 2090 mm. Courtesy
of the artist and
BRUNDYN+.