

REVIEWED BY GEORGE SLADE, PUBLISHED ON TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 16, 2010

Elizabeth Heyert *The Narcissists*

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ELIZABETH HEYERT. INTERVIEW BY STACEY D'ERASMO.

Sei Swann, 2009. Hardbound. 124 pp., 81 color illustrations, 10-3/4x13-3/4".

*The Narcissists Photographs* by Elizabeth Heyert. Interview by Stacey D'Erasmus.

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Some books prompt laughter or provoke anger. Some are thinly disguised exercises in self-aggrandizement or false humility. Some books are bent on little more than titillation, preaching to the converted, or celebrity worship. And some books transcend all of this and make you stop in your tracks. What's startling about Elizabeth Heyert's work in this volume is that, after it seizes hold of you, it forces you to recognize that the shortcomings ascribed to books are also evident in the human faces and forms we encounter every day; every one of us contains a volume, though reading it is not always pleasurable.

Heyert's "narcissists" are people who have agreed to stand in a room, facing a two-way mirror, for fifteen minutes. Behind the mirror is a camera, operated by the photographer, who is watching the subject through a peephole (not through the camera lens). A simple premise, expeditiously laid out before the book's first plates. The delectation then proceeds, through 22 individual and two double portraits. Each triptych portrait—reproduced on gatefolds so that three full folio-size color plates run adjacent to each other, with no indication of time sequence (which came first or last hardly seems important, except when someone appears clothed and naked)—reflects mesmerizing moments of self-absorption among an unlikely troupe of performers.

There are children in school uniforms, men tied up in red rope, faded beauties in fancy gowns, elderly men in glasses, and people of varying shapes in little or nothing at all. What unifies them all in this context is that we see them as they see themselves, or at least how the mirror sees them (as Heyert admits in a post-plates interview that is well worth reading). And how they see themselves, and react to the sight of themselves, is processed through an unknowable number of psycho-socio-cultural filters, through webs of experience we can only guess at in regarding these images. But flashes of external influence, alongside moments of sheer individual invention, are manifest among these self-displayers.

You can tell, too, that they don't always like what the mirror shows them. There are plenty of frankly exhausted gazes and disheartened expressions here. Some, in contrast, like the identically buff and coiffed twin Adonises Marty and Jake, appear absolutely transfixed by their reflections. Like I was, engaging with the book, which is riveting, meditative, and profoundly humane. —GEORGE SLADE

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