

Grabbing our attention

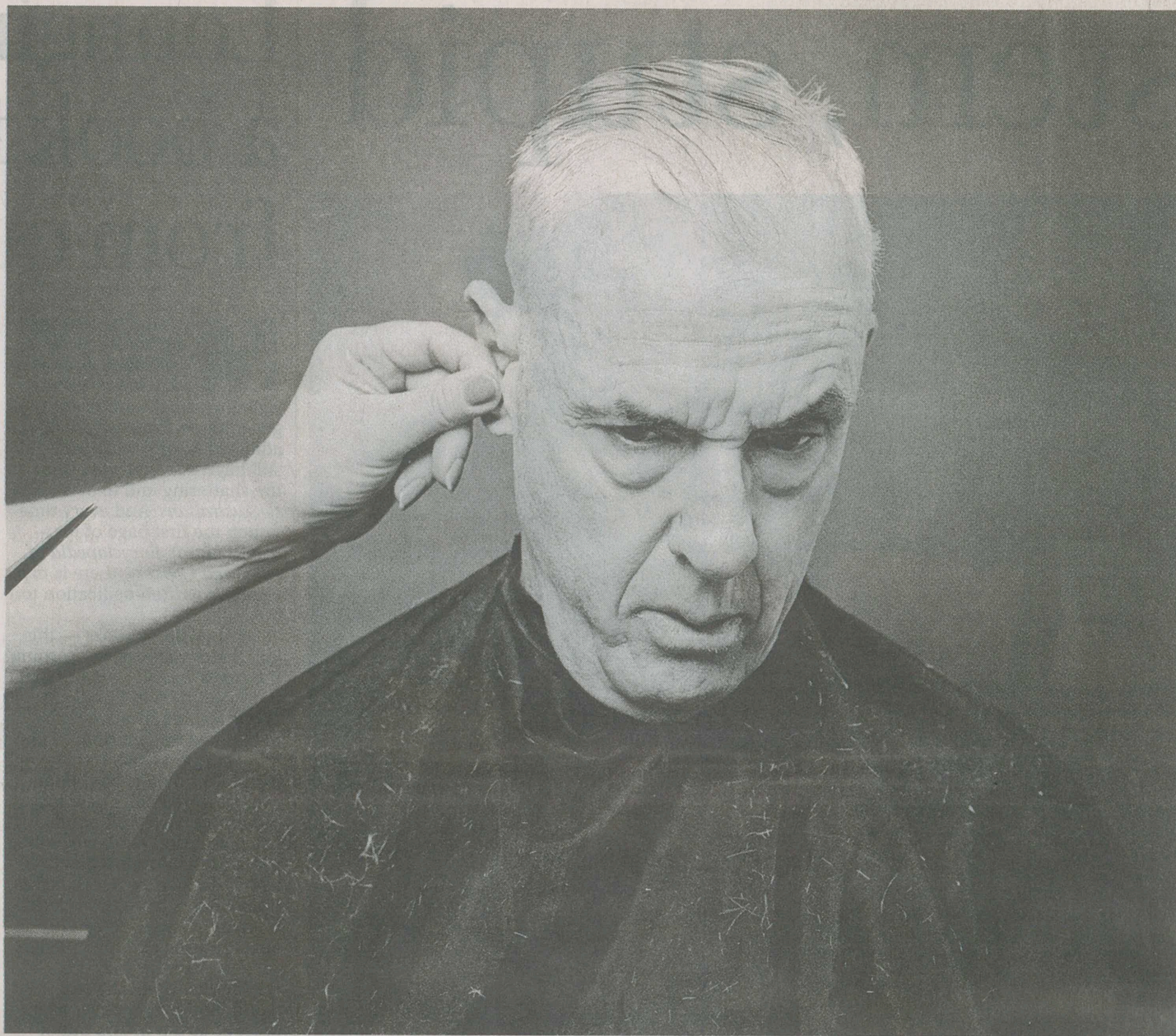
Photography moves beyond the literal to transfix the eye, writes Robert Nelson.

ANNE Ferran has constructed a video a bit like a slide show. Her *Canal* scrolls through peaceful still images of a waterway in urban circumstances. On the adjacent wall, however, successive people are seen concentrating on something and then momentarily looking up. It's as if these busy professionals behold the spectacle of the canal, and then rapidly turn away to resume their former absorption.

Ferran's work expresses something fundamental about the image. We tend to look at it for an instant and then look away, not because of impatience but because our eyes work quickly and we consider that the information apprehended in the instant is enough. Perhaps the same happens in reality: you glance, and the second devoted to the spectacle seems adequate. In this sense, photography struggles against the instinct of the eye: it tries to hold the attention of the viewer against the reflex to move on.

Photographers have several strategies for seizing our attention. One is to notice a circumstance that no one else has observed. Georgia Metaxas, in the Documentary Photography Award at the CCP, hits upon people having a haircut. The moments of the snip seem to equate frighteningly with the moment of the click: scissors and shutter have a startling quality, as of a flash. While the pathology of the clients is almost scientifically studied, the expressions and reactions within this curious ritual warrant extended contemplation.

Against this, one can create a mysterious image, one that reveals little, such as Jane Burton's sepia pictures at Karen Woodbury Gallery. Welcome to the haunted house of dark dwellings in deep prints, spooky sexy nudes, tall gardens and fairies to the side of the house catching butterflies. Many of these images are beautiful, even though they sometimes have inconsistent light; they all toy with our desire to know, like a game of secrets.



Georgia Metaxas' *Lower Your Ears*: The moments of the snip seem to equate frighteningly with the moment of the click.

An artist can use new photographic processes to distort imagery to yield curious spectacles, coincidences and slurs not seen before. Chantal Faust makes images on a scanner at Jenny Port Gallery, finding parallels with painting in the way that an image can slip and slide, stretch and shrink. In a clever essay, Edward Colless enjoys every smear by further breathless parallels with sex; so we are induced to look twice.

Other photographers identify something stunningly beautiful. Terence Bogue captures it with mastery at *Shifted*. His images of a woman's shoulder blades and hand remind me of the classics of American photography. But his tender marble-

like pictures also have an austere touch of Canova, silky but statuesque, sensual but chaste. Under the title *The Itch*, the sense of anecdote and perhaps erotic temptation arrives at iconic tranquillity.

And then there's narrative. Johanna Billing represents this tradition at ACCA with videos that are nevertheless very photographic and slow, with the motionless sense of the still. In *Where She Is At*, for example, a woman climbs up a diving tower by the sea to take the plunge. She vacillates a great deal, perhaps deferring the pleasure or maybe anxiously procrastinating. Often, high up on the concrete perch, she does very little, sometimes

slowly shuffling around the wrong side of the railing.

In videos, however, the stillness has a different meaning to the frozen moment of photography. In Billing, the energy is pent up, as of a lover trying to concentrate on an elusive climax. Then she manages it and a big splash relieves the tension.

So too with *Project for a Revolution*, only the release doesn't come. Young men and women have congregated in a large space, looking studiously concerned, as if their energies should be mounting to a major intervention in the course of history. But every movement seems like an anticlimax.

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PHOTOGRAPHY

Anne Ferran, *Canal*, and Georgia Metaxas, Centre for Contemporary Photography, 404 George Street, Fitzroy, until Sunday

Jane Burton, *Ivy*, Karen Woodbury Gallery, 4 Albert Street, Richmond, until Saturday

Chantal Faust, *Head Land*, Jenny Port Gallery, 7 Albert Street, Richmond, until Saturday

Terence Bogue, *Body of Work*, *Shifted*, 15 Albert Street, Richmond, until Saturday

Johanna Billing, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, 111 Sturt Street, Southbank, until Sunday