

Justine Varga

Tachisme

Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne

4 April – 9 May 2020

Tachisme is an exhibition that ruptures any clear distinction between photography and painting. The negatives from which these photographs derive were smeared and stained with pigment during their long exposures. When these negatives are then printed from at large-scale in the darkroom, the latent inscriptions are revealed to intermingle with the distinctive signature of the artist's fingertips, a trace of touching that is generally forbidden in the production of photographs.

Justine Varga has always seen her photography in these terms, as a drawing with light, or more literally as a light-sensitive substrate on which she makes marks or allows the world to leave its own marks. These photographs are therefore the making visible of an art practice that is at once physical and chemical, autobiographical and contingent, painterly and photographic. In doing so, *Tachisme* asks viewers to reflect on the activity of decipherment in relation to photographs, making this exhibition a critical rumination on inscription, meaning and knowledge.

Biography

Justine Varga is known for her luminous photographs, some made with a camera and some without (and some made with a combination of the two). Employing techniques that deserve comparison with the earliest nineteenth-century photographic experiments, Varga's work has been described as an autobiographical witnessing of the world – a memoir, rather than merely an act of representation.

Film registers performative gestures – is drawn upon, handled, scratched, spat on, weathered, or absorbs aspects of her everyday life. Exposed to light for long periods, the film is processed and then printed at large scale in the darkroom, itself a process of transformation. Functioning as 'ravaged memorials to lived experience', the works appear to be abstractions but are in fact rigorous distillations of the real.

Varga was the winner of the **2019 Dobell Drawing Prize** and has made a steady ascent since graduating with Honours from the National Art School, Sydney, in 2007. Accolades include the **Olive Cotton Award for Photographic Portraiture** (2017) and twice receiving the **Josephine Ulrick & Win Shubert Foundation for the Arts Photography Award** (2013, 2016).

Her works are in the collection of **National Gallery of Australia**, Canberra; **Art Gallery of New South Wales**, Sydney; **Art Gallery of South Australia**, Adelaide; **Monash Gallery of Art**, Victoria and **The University of Queensland Art Museum**, Brisbane.

Justine Varga is currently based in Oxford, UK.

Tachisme – Justine Varga
by Andrés Mario Zervigón
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Refraction is the name of the picture. Over a glowing sepia field, three horizontal swooshes of colour pile on top of each other. The variations of blue, purple and black seem to have been applied with a brush. Or perhaps a squeegee was involved; the colour looks as if it was both applied and partially scraped away, leaving sometimes-ghostly marks on the glowing ethereal surface. Another picture, titled *Visage*, sports a number of fingerprints and a diaphanous smudge, revealing that a hand actually laid down the pigment in a variety of animated movements. *Tachisme* is the title of the series in which both pictures appear. The name, which translates from French as “stain” or “spot,” references a Parisian postwar art movement that foregrounded gestural applications of paint to canvas with a brush, or sometimes through direct pouring. But a glance toward the top of *Refraction* and *Visage* begins to suggest a different story. There one finds the word “Kodak.” What is it that we are we looking at?

Justine Varga has focused much of her work on photographs printed from negatives that she has abraded in one way or another. She consciously breaks with photography’s long tradition of best practice by literally taking the light-sensitized celluloid into her hands to scratch its surface, scrawl on it with a pen, or blemish it with pigments such as glass paint and facial makeup, or even saliva (her own and others). She then places her battered negatives, already exposed to light and so much more for long durations, into a photographic enlarger and floods them with even more radiation. The resulting prints are large enough to immerse the body of their observer. Varga’s pictures are photographs, then, but they redefine the phenomenon of direct transcription that we generally associate with the medium. The conditions, actions, and objects that her prints record do not appear in illusionistic space, sharply defined on silver gelatin or chromogenic paper. Instead, they seem to sport clouds of hues which float and sometimes overlap each other on a field of undefined depth. What we find in *Tachisme* is a deliberate besmirching of photography’s most essential materials and attributes with the tender violence of the artist’s own hand.

The painters participating in the Tachisme of postwar Paris were part of the larger Art Informel movement in Europe, which, like Abstract Expressionism in North America and the Gutai Group in Japan, served up pictures made as a by-product of an artist’s physical engagement with a canvas (or other sort of support). The encounter could sometimes even damage the canvas underneath, or penetrate it so thoroughly with paint that pigment seeped through the fibers in a manner that the artist could not control. Critics interpreted the resulting works as expressions of postwar angst and trauma. The artists themselves may have also understood their efforts as a conscious departure from geometric non-objectivity, which was too impersonal and rigid for the aftermath of war and genocide. Varga engages in a similar sort of bodily self-expression in her series. She has, in essence, updated the metaphysical angst of midcentury action painting for our own chaotic age, when renewed anxieties around the politics of mass media have put pressure on the fidelity associated with photographic

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representation. Her works dismantle the expectations that those forces cultivate by breaking down the conventions that we otherwise expect to see in photographs. In so doing, she reasserts the photograph as a trace of the world. Her rubbed, scratched, and stained surfaces have been exposed to today's disintegrating social and ecological climate, resulting in a grand mix of personal inscription and environmental trace.

Though the final prints are large, Varga works with mere 4 x 5 inch negatives, which approximate the size of her palms. They make for a natural fit with her hands and other parts of the body or face. For example, *Visage's* negative was garnished with makeup. This is a product the artist could apply to her cheeks to cover imperfections, to achieve an impossible ideal of beauty, but the resultant photograph displays a green pallor, dark smudges and a weeping wound. Everywhere we look, identity is made unstable. For example, negative and positive sometimes inhabit a single photograph, a consequence of Varga's use of inter-negatives that reverse tone and form. As a consequence, her prints reveal multiple sets of braille-like holes and indentations at their edges, signposts to the complication of their means of production. Other pictures in the series, such as *Contusion* and *Influence*, reveal a black border and defused haze that emerge from the unmasked enlarger frame and its projected glow. The margin that usually quietly surrounds the photograph is here allowed to take precedence, complicating the relationship of edge to centre, along with all other relationships.

Varga shines another kind of light—of the metaphorical sort—on other parts of the analogue photographic process that we either overlook or seldom see. Her test strips hang, collage-like, on the gallery walls, once more recalling painterly prototypes even while threatening to venture into space as fully-fledged sculptural objects. It's as if the photographs have taken over, as if the art gallery and the studio have swapped places. Comprised of experiments toward the framed works that hang nearby, these installational clusters invite us to participate in the making process, selecting and rejecting this shred or that, just as the artist once did in her darkroom. The deformations on the surface of her photographs can now be recognized as the residue of a messy work procedure of accumulated misfires and hard-won successes. Constructed from the ruins of the photographic process, from those parts of the photograph that are usually discarded or destroyed, these three-dimensional works imply other kinds of ruination as well. Contaminating the usually pristine gallery space, just as their components have disrupted the perspectival order traditionally promised by the photograph, this is an art that is abject and yet strangely alluring. Infectious in every sense of the word, once seen, Justine Varga's photographs are stains that cannot be removed from the mind's eye, and for that very reason powerfully embody the anxieties and uncertainties that pervade our present moment.

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