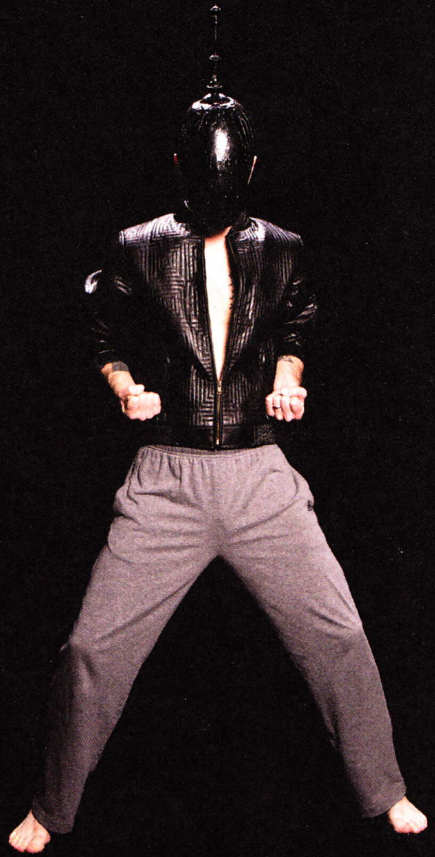


Thea Costantino

THE ANCESTORS





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AN HISTORICAL ACCOUNT OF 'THE ANCESTORS'



Who are our ancestors? In *The Ancestor's Tale: Pilgrimage to the Dawn of Life* (2004) Richard Dawkins asserts if we travel far enough back in time, we will discover that all ancestry is shared. He traces the origins of life to suggest that beyond human form our closest ancestors are the Chimpanzee and the Bonobo (pygmy chimpanzee). The common ancestor (concestor) that linked humans to primates lived approximately six million years ago which is why our apish ancestry is unlikely to be represented on a recent family tree. Nonetheless, if an epic evolutionary failure produced a moment in history in which a woman gave birth to an ape-headed boy, it is likely that we would want to know more about our uncanny lineage; what he looked like, how long he lived or whether or not he was a societal outcast. It is common practice to scour history and exhume evidence of breakaway blemishes that dog our natural form or behaviour, but can we ever believe and trust the documentary offerings of the past?

In *The Ancestors*, Thea Costantino questions the conviction that representations of history offer unmediated access to the past. She charts the visible markers of shared ancestry, not to pinpoint the origin of life, but to subvert the monumental and heroic modes of history that memorialise and piece together our pasts.

Her work is founded on obscure texts, documents, archives and collections that detail a range of unexpected philosophical and psychological findings, medical miracles and atrocities as well as other historical events. She reconfigures and re-narrates these eccentric findings into a collection of 'grotesque' artefacts including wax sculptures, graphite drawings, photographs and her own authored material. These faux historical reproductions form part of her investigation of the 'historiographic grotesque' and operate as satirical testimonies that suggest who we are, where we come from, and what we think we know is spurious, enigmatic and unknown.

Costantino's solo enterprises have primarily focused on grotesque representations of history through exquisitely rendered drawings, which interrupt the nostalgic appeal of the antique photograph. In the nineteenth century, the photograph became an

important tool in aiding the diagnosis and treatment of mental illness. Jean-Martin Charcot, who used hypnosis to advance the understanding of hysteria, frequently employed photographers to record public events in which his patients played out the symptoms of their mental illnesses. As a "scientific" record of history, the photograph was considered a forensic object capable of communicating the untold truth. It portrayed extraordinary and gruesome events ranging from war-time amputations to headless foetuses pickled in jars. In Costantino's drawings, she duplicates the absurd and uncensored nature of this photo-documentary approach. Her bizarre portraits, disconcerting collection of grotesque forms and archive of peculiar events not only reference Charcot's staged photographic practices but can be further contextualised through the early neuropsychological research of Sigmund Freud. In particular, the ongoing absence of body parts in her drawings invites the viewer to symbolically reflect on Freud's theories concerning castration anxiety. Her drawings underline the masculinisation of history and serve as a tool to challenge the security we take in the patriarchal ancestry of the past.

Whether Costantino's images depict a headless animal in a display case or a portrait of a shrunken head with vacant pin-hole eyes, her work is rendered in a way which visually reminds us of the antique photograph. She engenders this reading by building up layers of graphite that communicate soft light, dulled staining, blurred edges, faded marks and compositional defects. During the process of viewing antique photographs, nostalgia usually occurs because it is in this moment the past is recognised as inaccessible. Thus, the one viewing the image is rarely captured in it and so a viewing experience can only be improved upon through imagination, memory and desire. It resides in what Mikhail Bakhtin called historical inversion, which is the conviction that the idea not being played out in the present day is projected back into the past (Hutcheon 1998). In antique photographs the idea, feeling or experiences represented are memorialised as unchanging treasured moments, fixed in time by selective memory, the need to forget and through the distorted and re-ordered lens of desire. In as



much as Costantino's drawings exhibit a longing for the past consistent with antique photographs, the nostalgia they induce is more contradictory. Her drawings do not exile us from the present-day to bring the imagined past closer, rather they present a history in which imagination, memory and desire have nothing tangible from the past to grasp.

In a move away from drawing, Costantino's most recent work is a series of staged photographs which spoof the monumental history of European imperialism while noting its enduring legacy in postcolonial Australia. In this body of work, she documents the performance of a series of false and inconsistent identities: figurative icons of Eurocentric and colonial history. Her grotesque, excessive and dramatic figures don elaborate waxen headpieces. These are an extension of her early wax busts, which were informed by ancient funeral practices such as the effigy and the death mask as well as anatomical exhibits and Madame Tussaud's wax museum. In appearance, the headpieces are strange helmet-shaped relics that sport masses or tufts of black and white hair and eccentric veneers which masquerade the identity of her characters. In conjunction with the headpieces, the figures are made even more obscure by their outlandish outfits. In *The Arcades Project*, Walter Benjamin remarked that, "A definite perspective on fashion follows solely from the consideration that to each generation the one immediately preceding it seems the most radical anti-prosodic imaginable . . . Thus the confrontations with the fashions of previous generations is a matter of far greater importance than we ordinarily suppose. And one of the most significant aspects of historical costuming is that . . . it undertakes such a confrontation" (Benjamin and Tiedemann 1999, 64-65). Costantino follows Benjamin's lead and presents her invented icons engaged in a fashion war that is not only evident in the over-the-top headpieces but also in the array of unflattering antique and vintage costumes sourced from disconnected places and non sequential timelines. Her figures communicate the excesses of Imperial control but also a nation's superfluous inheritance; fashioned up ancestors whose garb offers no meaning or identity in history. Her photographs stage an artifice in which disorder, detachment and ambiguity shatter the sense of security we take in knowing our represented past.

Who are our ancestors? While we can biologically trace our ancestral origins, any certainty about our past is subject to the recorded documentation of history. Costantino's grotesque reinvention of history provides an ironic and uncertain account; a digression that offers both insight and witty appraisal of who we are.

By Dr Anna Nazzari

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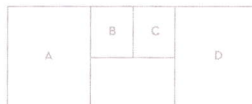
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Hutcheon, Linda. 1998. *Irony, Nostalgia and the Postmodern*. Accessed August 4, <http://www.library.utoronto.ca/utel/criticism/hutchinp.html>

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- A - **Ancestor III** 2012 Giclee print
- B - **Ancestor II** 2012 Giclee print
- C - **Ancestor IV** 2012 Giclee print
- D - **Ancestor I** 2012 Giclee print

WHITE



- E - **Ancestor VI** 2012 Giclee print
- F - **Ancestor VII** 2012 Giclee print
- G - **Ancestor V** 2012 Giclee print
- H - **Ancestor VIII** 2012 Giclee print

