

The photographic collages of Bill Henson: materials, techniques and conservation

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ABSTRACT

During the 1980s and 1990s Bill Henson made a number of photographic collage works. These works, sometimes referred to as cut screens, were created on a support of either plywood, or corrugated cardboard adhered to a wood framework. The support was left bare or covered with glassine and cut up photographs were attached to the support using blue metal tacks, if required, and self-adhesive tape. Over time the tape began to fail and the artist decided to change the works so that rather than readhering or replacing the pieces of tape he used pins to hold the pieces of tape and the photographs in their original positions. Later collage works were taped and pinned by the artist at the time of creation in recognition of the inherent instability of the tape. In a few instances the artist replaced photograph pieces where discolouration or fading affected the appearance of the works.

Based on documentation of the works in the AGNSW collection and interviews with Henson, this paper looks at the materials and techniques used to create these works and compares Henson's approach to their conservation with more conventional conservation approaches.

KEYWORDS

Bill Henson, photography, collage, contemporary art, conservation.

INTRODUCTION

Working at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA) in Sydney, Australia in 2004 the author was asked to prepare condition reports for three Bill Henson photographic collages that had been on long-term loan from a private lender and were to be returned. These large works were made from cut up photographs attached to a glassine and corrugated cardboard support on a pine stretcher. The photographs were held in place with black or cream masking tape and a few tacks here and there. The tape was still attached but was discoloured and desiccated and looked like it might fall off soon. Intrigued by the works and their unstable condition the author pondered what treatment methods might be appropriate. The condition problems were noted and it was recommended that the works be treated soon to stop the tape and the photographs falling off.

Two months later, working at the Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW), the author had to check some incoming works by Bill Henson that turned out to be the same works. Shortly after, the Bill Henson exhibition opened at AGNSW and the author was able to see many more of Henson's photographic collages and began to learn about his approach to the conservation of these works. Based on documentation of the works in the AGNSW collection and interviews with Henson, this paper looks at the materials and techniques used to create these works and compares Henson's approach to their conservation with more conventional conservation approaches.

BACKGROUND

The work of Bill Henson, arguably one of Australia's best known contemporary artists, has been controversial for many years since he began making his dark and edgy photographs of naked teenagers. The artist first came to prominence in 1975 when at the age of nineteen he had an exhibition of his photographs at the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. In the late 1980s Henson began making photographic collages, creating a number of series. In 1995 Henson was chosen to represent Australia at the 46th Biennale of Venice where he exhibited 13 of these works. The fragmented images of naked and dirt smeared teenagers in a dark and dreamlike landscape of wrecked cars and trees in silhouette are haunting and confronting. In creating these works Henson was interested in coming to grips with the materiality of a photograph. He was interested in the photograph as an object

that inhabited space while it was at the same time an allusion to or suggestion of another world, the world captured in the image. Commenting on these works Henson has said:

The critical thing in photography is to be able to create an experience that is intensely intimate...I'm interested in that tender proximity, that ineffable, fragile, breathing closeness or presence which photography can animate while, at the same time, allowing no possibility for any familiar connection with the individuals in the picture.

How does one suggest everything yet prescribe nothing? (Smee 1996, p.5)

MATERIALS AND TECHNIQUES

Henson has always had a very hands-on approach to all aspects of his work. Unlike many contemporary photographers Henson has always printed his own photographs. As he explains:

... I have to make my own pictures because it's no one else's business. The idea of getting someone else to print something, to create this thing for the first time, to work it all out and make it as hopeless or as good as it can be, the whole idea of someone else doing it ... I can't understand, for that whole reason of it being an object... (Henson 2010 pp.40-41)

You come to understand so much of what the picture might be about through the making of it. It seems less central, many would suppose, to photography than, say, painting, but I disagree. I think an intimate engagement at the physical level is essential and fundamental in the creation of anything. (Smee 2003, p.13)

Henson's hands-on approach also extends to the lighting and exhibition of his works. For Henson, exhibition is:

...the ultimate physical expression of the work. I can't see any sense in putting everything you can into pictures and then just sort of throwing them on the wall with no further thought to the way they might occupy the space. (Smee 1996, p.4).

Lighting is particularly important to Henson who feels that if the lighting is too bright all the subtle shadow detail in his works is lost (Henson 2010, pers.comm., June 15).

The cut screens were created using photographs Henson printed for the collages and others he had discarded. Henson used the front and back of the photographic paper and experimented with shapes. As he explains, the range of blacks in the photographs was an important visual element.

...there are all different types of blacks and shades of black, there are warm blacks and cool blacks and it's really important. I mean that's the hardest thing about reproducing these things in print, controlling the warmth's or the coolness of the blacks and the density of the blacks. (Henson 2010, p.19)

The photographic paper was cut from the front or reverse deliberately angling the cut to expose varying amounts of the white back of the paper. Sometimes the paper was torn or used as found on the floor of the studio with creases, soiling or shoe marks left intact. Pinholes and tape residues are sometimes evident on the works and are indicative of changes Henson made in the process of creating the works. Describing this process Henson has said,

There is this constant little ballet between being offhand and being absolutely delicate and very very focused with what you are doing and I kind of go back and forth between the two things. You'd be standing in front of something after cutting the paper at a 45 degree angle so that there wasn't the white line through the thickness of the paper visible just the actual emulsion running right to this razor edge, doing that with a scalpel of course, and you'd spend ages just getting it to where you think you want it and then you'd be standing on a scrap of paper and I'd pick up the bit with my footprint on it and then go 'Ahh' and that would be exactly where that needed to be... So sometimes bits of paper found their way into these things which had been thrown into a bin and then I got them out of the bin again and that's why in some instances the paper looks damaged or creased (Henson 2005, p.11)

The first cut screens, created in the 1980s, are on sealed plywood and generally have a large central image with smaller collaged elements placed around the edges (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Bill Henson *Untitled 1987/88*, 1987-1988, type C photograph on marine ply. 240.0 x 180.0cm. Rudy Komon Memorial Fund; Collection: Art Gallery of New South Wales. ©Bill Henson. Courtesy Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery. Photographed by Jenni Carter, AGNSW.

On the works from this period in the AGNSW collection there is sometimes evidence of cut marks in the plywood support along the edges of collage elements indicative of the fact that Henson sometimes cut the collage elements in situ. Blue metal tacks and

black gaffer tape have been used to secure the positions of the photographic paper. In some cases a folded or rolled piece of tape sits behind a collage element to secure it in place. On one of these works in the AGNSW collection there are spots of adhesive in a number of places securing collage elements, though Henson does not recall using adhesive and does not like the effect of the adhesive on the way the paper hangs.

The AGNSW cut screens dating from 1992/93, the works the author first encountered at the MCA, were created on a corrugated cardboard support attached to a pine wood framework. The support is covered in a number of layers of glassine. For these works the photographic paper has been secured with blue metal tacks and either black photographic masking tape or cream-coloured masking tape (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. Bill Henson *Untitled 1992/93*, 1992-1993, Collage: type C photographs, synthetic polymer paint, pins and tape on glassine and cardboard. 300.0 x 243.0cm. Anonymous gift 2008. Collection: Art Gallery of New South Wales. ©Bill Henson. Courtesy Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery. Photographed by Johan Palsson, AGNSW.

The use of blue metal tacks and adhesive tape to secure the collaged photographic paper was originally chosen for ease of use. The works were created one at a time, sometimes over many months with Bill Henson continually adjusting the placement of the photographic paper until the work looked right. The adhesive tape made this process very easy as the pieces could be positioned then peeled off again and again if necessary. For this reason Henson has noted:

The tape was never put on, the tape was just left on... I put the tape on because it is a quick and easy way of putting the paper onto the surface, but then you'd remove bits of tape, but some bits of tape just stayed there because they seem right... and if a little bit ended up being there because it needed to be there, that's how I feel about it. And there's little squares of tape floating around in the blackness, not holding themselves onto anything too, so the tape is certainly an element of the composition and it is sort of like a halfway thing between the white of the paper and black of the actual exposed photograph. (Henson 2005, p.43)

Through this process of creating and rearranging the parts Henson was able to manipulate the space in the image. Referring to the 1992/93 series Henson has said:

The space in the pictures is very contained but there's a kind of flat, vertical, foreshortened sense of space and the landscape and chaos of the wreckage of cars is piled up as a wall behind these people... This verticality and slightly impacted perspective gives a sense of claustrophobia to the work. I like that because it allows you to be more formally severe in the picture without relying on wacky camera angles or the more silly kind of photographic devices to create a sense of drama or foreboding. A slight shift in the sense of space can create an air of drama that can't be pinned down to any formal device. (McGillick 1995, p.525)

The important thing for Henson was that the form of the work should 'disappear into the experience of looking' (Smee 1996, p.5). Henson has said:

... if the object is more important than the image then you have an imbalance and if the image is more important than the object you have an imbalance... When something really, really works when it becomes a magical experience, form and content are indivisible. (Henson 2010, p.43)

This finely balanced relationship between material and image becomes particularly important when thinking about the deterioration and conservation of these works. The nature of the image and the meanings it is meant to convey are inherently tied up in the material form of the work and may therefore be lost or damaged as the work deteriorates.

CONSERVATION ISSUES

Henson is concerned about preserving his works and stores his collection of negatives in a fireproof data safe. While his primary focus is always the creation of new work, he sees systems for the identification and safe storage of his works as being a logical approach given that he has put so much time into their creation.

In choosing materials for the creation of the cut screens Henson considered technical requirements such as the ease of use of the masking tape as well as concerns for the stability of the materials. The plywood supports on the early works for example, were sealed to form a protective layer between the wood and the photographs. Henson always went to great lengths to ensure that he processed his colour photographs as well as possible and even altered the washing process introducing an extra wash and manipulating the water flow in the tanks to eliminate any risk of there being residual chemicals. At the same time Henson is aware of the inherent instability of colour photographs and is concerned about changes in the photographs that may occur over time.

The inherent instability of the tape used to secure the photographic paper for the cut screens became a problem in the 1990s as the tape began to fail on earlier works. The gaffer tape on the 1987/88 works in the AGNSW collection has now shrunk somewhat exposing the adhesive layer attached to the photographic paper and in some areas the tape has partially delaminated (see Figure 3).



Figure 3. Bill Henson *Untitled 1987/88*, 1987-1988 (detail), type C photograph on marine ply. 240.0 x 180.0cm. Rudy Komon Memorial Fund; Collection: Art Gallery of New South Wales. ©Bill Henson. Courtesy Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery. Photographed by Carolyn Murphy, AGNSW.

The masking tape, particularly the cream masking tape, used on the works from 1992/3 in

the AGNSW collection has discoloured, desiccated and partially delaminated.

Henson's response in the 1990s was to change such works so that rather than readhering or replacing the pieces of tape he used pins to hold the pieces of tape and the photographs in their original positions. This approach to the conservation of the cut screens was quite deliberate. Henson was aware of archival tapes but decided not to bother with changing the type of tape or with readhering the tape, as he preferred the pins. Henson liked the fact that the pinholes 'registered' the location of the tapes.

Later collage works in the AGNSW collection from 1994/5 and 1995/6 (see Figure 4) were taped and pinned by the artist at the time of creation in recognition of the inherent instability of the tape but Henson does not generally see the pins as a part of the composition.



Figure 4. Bill Henson *Untitled 1995/96*, 1995-1996, Diptych: 2 type C photographs, adhesive tape, pins, glassine. 305 x 245cm, 250 x 179cm. Purchased 1996. Collection: Art Gallery of New South Wales. ©Bill Henson. Courtesy Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery. Photographed by Jenni Carter, AGNSW.

Henson would not have added the pins if they were not needed to secure the tape and has generally painted the pinheads black or white to minimise their presence in the composition. It is only where the pinhead has been left unpainted, so that the pinhead is quite visible, can it be considered a deliberate compositional device.

This use of pins is interesting from a conservation perspective. Generally, conservators would not choose pins given the problem of how to repair these works. However, a more usual conservation method such as readhering the detached or failing tape with a more stable adhesive would not necessarily be a good solution. The discoloured and degraded tape looks as though it should fall off and if held in place with adhesive might in fact attract more attention as being odd. Van de Wetering (1996, p.417) sees this problem as one of museum style:

Both the signs of aging and the signs of wear may be disturbed severely in the course of restoration; even if they are consciously respected by the restorers, an alien effect may result. The surface acquires a look that does not occur 'in nature'... the piece has acquired the characteristics of a museum object.

The pins are a fairly minimal device that do not stand out visually when looking at the works overall, given their large scale, but are at the same time visible up close allowing the viewer to understand why the failing or failed tape has not fallen off. The logic of the pins in terms of our understanding of the aging of materials is in this way arguably less obtrusive.

Of the works in the AGNSW collection, pinning 'treatments' have been undertaken by the artist on the 1987/88 works and the 1992/93 works since the works came to AGNSW. For two of the

1987/88 works pins have been added in only a few places where the tape was lifting. But the 1992/93 works have been extensively pinned out. The tape on these works exhibited severe desiccation and partial delamination (see Figure 5).

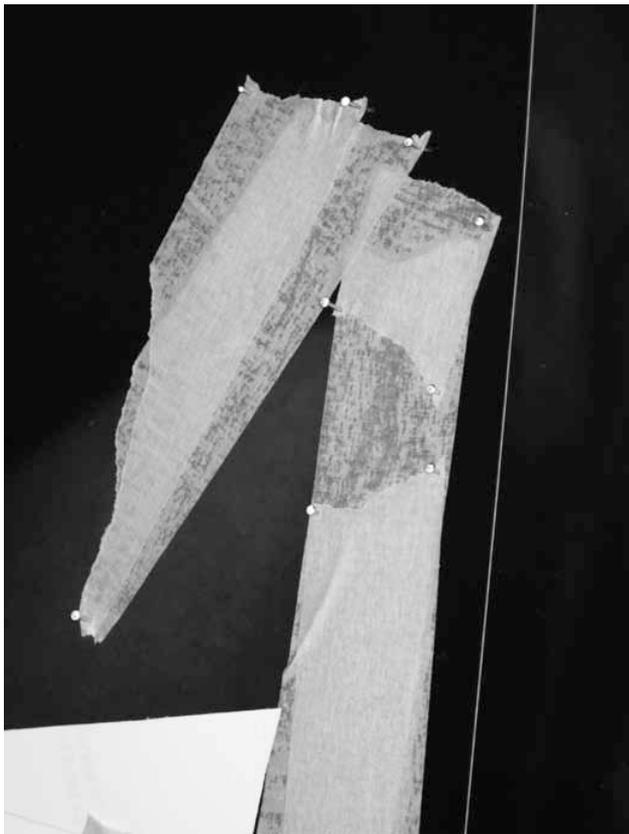


Figure 5. Bill Henson *Untitled 1992/93, 1992-1993* (detail), Collage: type C photographs, synthetic polymer paint, pins and tape on glassine and cardboard. 300.0 x 243.0cm. Anonymous gift 2008. Collection Art Gallery of New South Wales. ©Bill Henson. Courtesy Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery. Photographed by Carolyn Murphy, AGNSW.

It was felt that it was only a matter of time before the tape would begin to fall off the works. Earlier this year Henson indicated that he did not mind if museums contacted him or not regarding proposed treatment of his works (Henson 2010, pp.11-29). However, in 2005 Henson was more interested in being involved.

When you are pinning things you can get this sort of upholstered studded look if you are not careful and that is something that has to be avoided, because the pin does enanchor [sic] the paper and the whole thing about these is the way the paper hangs and so it is just one of those things that you have to look at it and see whether it changes the look of the surface. That is why every time I encounter something like this I have to get involved and pin it out so it's then my fault and my decision. (Henson 2005, pp.43-44)

Another strategy that Henson has employed to conserve his photographic collages is the replacement of photographic paper pieces. On two occasions Henson has replaced parts for owners who have come to him when the work was damaged. In one case a piece had been water damaged and in the other case one collage piece had faded quite significantly, though inexplicably, compared to the rest of the work. In both cases Henson had no problem with the idea of replacing the damaged pieces and did the work himself. While the balance between form and content is integral to the meaning of these works Henson does not see the originality of the materials as inherently important.

In fact, Henson is willing to go so far as to see the creation of copies of his photographic collages as an appropriate conservation strategy if his works become so faded or discoloured

that they no longer convey the meaning he intends. In answer to concerns about the original work Henson's response is,

Well what about the original? Well the original doesn't have to be touched. The original can sit there and gradually turn blue over the decades. But there is no reason why they cannot be recorded digitally so that if you want to see this thing, what it was actually, what the artist intended it to look like, you can." (Henson 2010, p.12).

Understandably, Henson is concerned about the inherent instability of chromogenic photography, the medium he worked in for many years until 2010 when he began printing his photographs digitally. His current practice when making new photographs is to use an analogue camera and scan the negatives to create digital prints. Using this same approach, Henson therefore has the capacity to reprint any work made from a single negative if required and has done so on one or two occasions. For the cut screens, however, the use of the original negatives is not really feasible since the works have been created from so many different photographs it would be practically impossible to unravel the origin of each part (Henson 2010, pers. comm., June 15).

For Henson creating copies is entirely appropriate for his work since photography, by its nature, is reproducible. Henson is aware of the use of copying as a conservation strategy in museums for photographic collections and sees no difference between that situation and the conservation of his cut screens. He cites a theoretical example of a deteriorated glass plate negative,

Well you can say that's the original piece of glass that was in the back of whoever's camera, Shackleton's camera or something, so that's the original piece of glass but you couldn't say that's the original photograph because the photograph is no longer visible. (Henson 2010, p.20)

Henson sees the creation of copies as essentially a technical exercise that could be undertaken by a museum or other organisation that was interested in preserving his work. According to Henson the collages could be scanned using a giant flatbed Cruse scanner to capture the images. Another option, if this technology were not available, would be to photograph the works using a high-resolution digital scanning back on a large format view camera to photograph the works in sections.

The collages consist of a few layers of photographs and so Henson argues it would be possible to print out copies for each layer. Then a technician could cut out the collage pieces and assemble a copy using tacks, pins and tape to match the original. Henson sees no reason to change to a more stable tape since he prefers the idea of pinning. In Henson's view, the sooner the works could be digitised the better, to capture the images before they begin to deteriorate appreciably. The process of recreating the works could be undertaken at a later date if and when it was determined that the original was now no longer as the artist intended.

COPYING AS A CONSERVATION STRATEGY

A wide range of considerations impacts any decision to copy an artwork including the artist's intentions, the relationship between material and meaning in the work, the importance of authenticity, the place of the work in an art historical framework and the technical and financial resources available. There are no simple answers and each work must be considered individually. (Foundation for the Conservation of Modern Art, Amsterdam 1999).

A number of issues and challenges arise when considering the possibility of making copies of Bill Henson's cut screens. A primary issue is the 'made' quality of the works: every cut, every tear, every crumpled or soiled part has been made or chosen by the artist. In Henson's view a skilled technician could make a faithful copy but would such a copy retain the vitality of the

original? Another problem is the photographs themselves. Henson no longer prints colour photographs and has spent a lot of time and energy developing a digital printing set up that meets his requirements. He now feels that the digital prints he makes are so close in appearance to his previous colour photographs that even he cannot tell them apart. But will digital prints and the white back of the digital paper look right for the cut screens? Will the works cease to look like works from the 1980s and 1990s and become products of the time in which they are made anew?

Such dilemmas do not carry weight with Henson since the original will still exist. He sees the two works, the original and the copy, existing in parallel universes.

You can have the original, there it is, right in front of you, you can have it, you can look at it and walk around it and sniff it. And here's what it looked like when it was made...which means if you want to experience it as the artist intended it to be seen when it was first made, there it is. It's like what you are getting is more. If you want you can get less but my suggestion is we should have more. (Henson 2010, p.44)

And Henson makes an important point. What if the original works do become so faded and discoloured that they no longer look as the artist intended or convey the meanings the artist intended? What is worse, to lose material authenticity or to lose meaning? And at what point, and how, do you decide what has been lost and whether action is appropriate? Vinas argues that conservation treatment is carried out

...to allow an object to convey some particular meanings more effectively and / or for a longer period of time...[but] it also means that that same object may no longer convey other possible meanings. (Vinas 2009, p.54)

He suggests that conservators should think in terms of 'balanced meaning-loss' (Vinas 2009, p.57) when determining what level of intervention is appropriate, highlighting the fact that all conservation decisions are a compromise.

CONCLUSION

The author's curiosity about the condition of Henson's cut screens began with the mundane material reality of what to do about the failing tape. But as more was learned about these works it became clear this was a conservation problem that Henson himself had identified and resolved long before. The use of pins while not a conventional conservation approach is one that most conservators could live with given the fact that it is the artist's preference and the fact that other alternatives are not all that satisfactory.

Most conservators would also share Henson's concern about potential colour change and fading as these works continue to age even though the idea of copying the works might seem problematic. The conventional conservation approach to colour change and fading in photographs is preventive conservation measures which slow deterioration but cannot reverse it. Given this, perhaps it is appropriate to consider Henson's idea of high-resolution digital documentation before the works become appreciably changed. Such documentation will be a valuable record, but it will also provide sufficient information to make copying of these works possible if and when such a strategy might be considered appropriate.

It is easy as conservators to become so engrossed by the materials from which a work is made and the conservation problems that appear to emanate from their condition that it is possible to forget to stand back and see the whole work and not just the many parts. In speaking with Bill Henson about his photographic collages the author was reminded again and again that while the material is important it is not everything. The image and the material together make an artwork and it is important to keep that in mind when making conservation decisions.

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BIOGRAPHY

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