

## COPY / CUT / PASTE

DR FREYA GOWRLEY



Sarah Eyre, *Untitled (Copy/Cut/Paste)*, 2019. Digital photographs on rag paper. Photo by Hamish Irvine

would be around a person's face, whilst in another, the lines of the cut paper that comprise its layers evoke profiles, rotated and disrupted. As such, the works suggest a portraiture potentiality that is compelling and yet never fully realised; though the wig might be an accessory used within a ritual self-fashioning, this rite is never seemingly fully enacted within these images. Interiority (of wig or wearer), is only suggested, alluded to by the negative space created in the works.

There is something compellingly familiar about these images, which reference both forms of conventional femininity and methods of artistic production with which we have long been familiar. Indeed, with their sophisticated visual qualities, subtly varied colour palette of greys, and refined dark-toned wooden frames, the works initially seem like apt inclusions for the walls of a boardroom, a space often associated with corporate conservatism. Yet these are works that reward careful looking, compensating the viewer's attention to their multi-layered forms with a rich and provocative meditation on the nature of the thing that they are looking at. *Copy / Cut / Paste* are not merely the modes through which these photographic collages were made; instead they are thoughtful signposts that reflexively relate the works to broader models of artistic production, and which reinforce that these artistic processes are themselves deeply related to means of self-fashioning and display.

*Dr Freya Gowrley is Postdoctoral Fellow in History at the University of Derby.*

As the title suggests, Sarah Eyre's exhibition *Copy / Cut / Paste* is a show about process; a dual evocation of the technological present, and the longstanding tradition of collage production past. Of the three titular operations, 'cut' is perhaps the most immediately palpable process enacted within the works shown: here representing a perfect marriage of subject and object as defined (and redefined) through a singular reflexive operation. Indeed, the act of cutting characterises the construction of two distinctive cultural modes that occur within Eyre's works: firstly, as the typifying cultural interaction with the represented subject, that is, the depicted wig styled through the act of cutting, and secondly, as the mode through which the finished art object was made, a gestural echo that ties the work's various states of being together.

The complex temporalities of these works are likewise shown through their use of an act traditionally thought of in binary opposition to the cut, that of pasting, which



Sarah Eyre, *Untitled (Copy/Cut/Paste)*, 2019. Digital photographs on rag paper. Photo by Hamish Irvine





Sarah Eyre, Untitled (Copy/Cut/Paste), 2019 installation shot. Digital photographs on rag paper. Photo by Hamish Irvine

manifests in the final images through Eyre's use of carefully overlapping layers. Here the artist has placed print upon print, photograph upon photograph, paper on paper, playing as much with the (represented) object's body as the negative space it creates. Besides the photographic prints, the works also appear to feature another layered element – a pale checked surface, unconsciously reminiscent of a cleaning cloth. As a surface, the cloth resonates tangibly with ideas of women's work, and specifically of a feminine labour that might at once refer to women's artistic practices as much as domestic economy. The inclusion of these materials is thereby particularly reminiscent of the work of germinal collage artists like Hannah Höch, whose work *Weißer Form* (1919) utilised sewing patterns in order to collapse traditional forms of women's work with her then transgressive participation within the Dada movement.

The work is also characterised by less immediately evident techniques: the 'copying' of the exhibition's title, for example, which here refers to the fact that Eyre photographed her collages in order to make these works. As such, copying is an operation that seeks to complicate and even obfuscate the other two; wherein the cutting and pasting and layering that is so crucial to the appearance of these works, is rendered seamless and flat. Hiding these seams, of course, draws further attention to them. Conversely,



Sarah Eyre, Untitled (Copy/Cut/Paste), 2019 installation shot. Digital photographs on rag paper. Photo by Hamish Irvine

in other pieces these seams are opened up through playful *trompe l'oeil*, where both the surface of the wig and its visual representation appear to be cut away to reveal the negative space in and between its own exterior and interior elements, but this, like the wig itself, is just a suggestion of the thing.

Like cutting, the layering that is inherent to the pieces is, once again, a reflexive gesture towards their feminine subject - the wigs that most often form the basis for the photograph. Worn atop of the head, potentially over the wearer's own hair; wigs evoke the performance of selfhood that is inherent to many forms of fashion and accessory. Highlighting the artificiality of the act of dressing through their coiffed and styled appearance, wigs reinforce the idea of the body as its own form of assemblage. Like the collaged nature of these works, so too is the body comprised of parts, layers, and coverings; a surface that can be read variously as part or whole. As such, the works are reminiscent of Eyre's own earlier practice of collecting (and subsequently photographing) discarded hair extensions in the street; pieces of the self, lost and detached from their owners' bodies. The acquisition of such found objects is in itself powerfully evocative of historical collage and assemblage, which often employed *objet trouvé* amongst their constitutive elements, and can in turn be placed within a broader framework of collecting



Sarah Eyre, Untitled (Copy/Cut/Paste), 2019. Digital photographs on rag paper. Photo by Hamish Irvine

and practice that Eyre's works clearly participate within.

That the wigs are such, and are not 'natural' hair, is reflected through their presentation on wig stands, although at times these are only a suggested presence in the photographs. The images thereby exist on an axis of duplicity, wherein across the works the viewer cannot be perfectly certain if they are looking at a wig, or the abstracted back of a person's head. References to the absent presence of a portrayed human subject also abound in the works: in one of the images the wig is parted as it