

\$ FREE

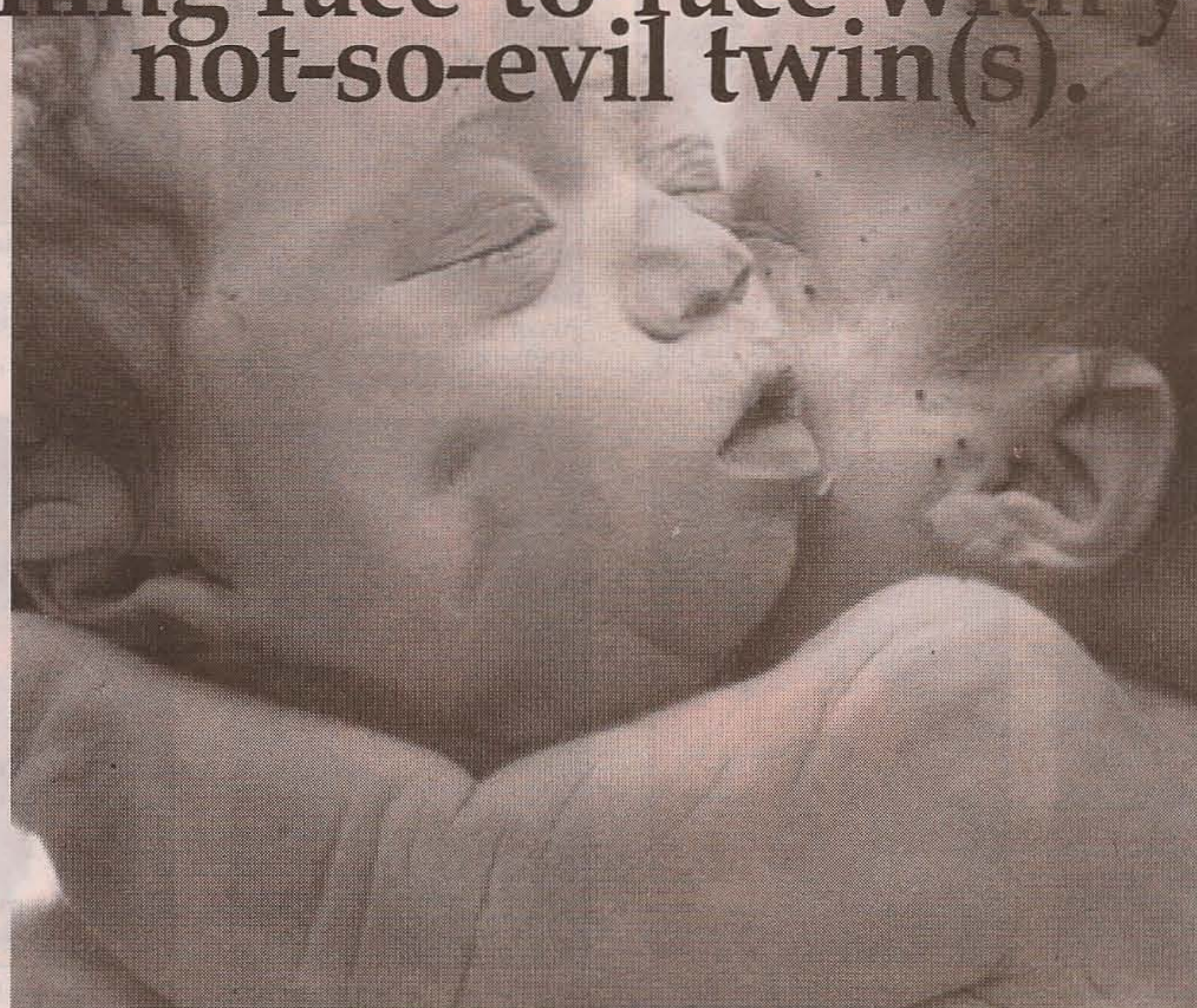
upfront

magazine

SEPTEMBER 2009 - issue #37



Don't Look Away: coming face-to-face with your not-so-evil twin(s).



Tim Porter's life-sized, grayscale photographs of anomalous fetuses and conjoined-twins, either stillborn or dead shortly after birth, subvert the subjects' surreal and at times disturbing appearances, emphasizing their essential humanity over their otherness. Shot in Bangkok's Siriraj Hospital in the winter of 1988, these images are making their first gallery appearance over twenty years later, at Guy Bérubé's La Petite Mort Gallery, where they will be featured from September 5th to 17th as part of the Ottawa Photography Month.

Though individual photographs from the series were published in the BLIND SPOT photography journal (New York), and projected at a 2008 event in Tokyo, the complete body of work "has never been exhibited in a gallery or a museum," Porter says. He estimates that over the years he has submitted this ten-photograph series, *Still Life*, "to almost every art museum in Canada." Yet, for reasons unknown to the artist and regardless of the popularity of his other work (the Canadian Museum of Contemporary Photography houses 123 Porter originals), Porter's *Still Life* series has been consistently passed over by

museum curators and gallery owners alike - with the exception of La Petite Mort's Guy Bérubé.

Familiar with the artist's other work, Bérubé recalls being especially blown away by Porter's *Still Life* series, and that, "when he agreed that we should show it in Ottawa, I knew that the quality of my exhibits had gone up a notch. I also know that this will stir things up."

Why, you may ask? "Cause it's dead babies," Bérubé explains. "Duh."

Any explanations from the artist are equally illuminating. Born in Washington, D.C., Tim Porter currently

resides in Tokyo and, in addition to being a photographer and aspiring Japanese gardener, he seems to have also mastered the art of Jedi mind tricks. Most questions concerning his intentions in photographing these subjects were met with elusive though clever responses.

What he did say is that this body of work is a meditation and devotion to its subjects, and to "a terrible beauty."

This same beauty could explain why this body of work has stayed with him all these years. "[T]hese subjects are family - a waking dream and sometimes night-

mare - always with me to nurture, guard and protect."

Porter first decided to photograph these specimens when a quest for inspiration and several guidebooks led him to their home at the Congdon Anatomical Museum in Bangkok, Thailand. "Discovering these subjects on display was like encountering the memories of lost friends. I knew I must photograph them." Not long after, Porter underwent an extensive and unconventional interview with the Director of the Siriraj Hospital, of which the Anatomical Museum is a part, and was finally allowed to set up a temporary still life studio in the hospital to photograph the twenty-or-so unusual specimens for one week.

Though the thought of conjoined-twin fetuses in jars may evoke images of vulnerability, otherness or even freakishness, Porter shot his subjects in such a way as to highlight their sublimity and humanity. 14"x14" square formatting approximates the infants' real, "human size," and crops them so as to marginalize their defects or conjunctures and eliminate the visible limits of their glass cases. This invites the viewer into the vessels and, as Christopher Davidson of the National Gallery of Canada describes, "eliminat[es] all traces of location, time and place."

Porter affirms this evaluation and elaborates, saying, "I wanted the subjects to appear to be 'floating' in amniotic fluid," glowing "with a kind of Divine Light... I wanted them to look happy, beautiful, sublime."

Porter identifies the lighting as his central focus in developing these images; yet the subjects' reflective casings

I wanted the subjects to appear to be 'floating' in amniotic fluid, glowing "with a kind of Divine Light.... I wanted them to look happy, beautiful, sublime.

restricted the amount and angle of lighting he could use, prompting him to opt for a go-big-or-go-home-style solution: "I had to improvise by using a big fluorescent light box to illuminate the subjects from behind, plus one from each side at 45 degree angles. The exposure times were long and the heat unbelievable."

The effect is a series of slightly overexposed, highly detailed images that feature just enough dark tones to ground

their surreal subjects in reality, highlighting the human details, like fingernails, so as "to see more life," Porter explains. "I used an incident meter and 'overexposed' one stop to get as much subject detail as possible."

In her paper presented at the 2005 Human Remains conference in London, UK, Sara Barnes explains that body-centred, contemporary art which incorporates museum archives or displays, as Porter's does, is imbued with an intensity which "frequently centres upon the ethical practice of both medical science and the museum."

In Porter's photographs, however, these issues do not seem to be a factor, and the subjects' humanity is further highlighted by their intimate positions. Most of the twins are embracing and resting their heads against each other, positions which the artist speculates must have been arranged, to a certain extent, by the medical technicians who prepared them. "I can't imagine having done a better job myself," Porter says, "and would have changed nothing at all."

When asked about the impressions received from his photographs, the artist said these are "completely unconscious" on his part. His main interest is "to be an explorer first, then an artist."

So, though Porter brings observers along on his expeditions into the farther reaches of the world and of human (ab)normality, he won't tell us what to see or what to think about it. He only asks that when you see it, whatever it is, "Don't look away." **up**

ART NOTES:

Unfolding Evanesces: Hutong House and Room will be at **Gallery 101** from September 4 to October 10. Toronto artist Yam Lau will be using video projections to explore and complicate forms of spatial expression and presentation. This month at **Canteen** will feature art by Ryan Stec, acrylic and oil paintings by 17-year-old Sebastian Millar, and machines by Toronto's Chris Brett. At **La Petite Mort** this month:

a solo show by Tony Fohse, creator of the User series, will be presenting his latest project Erik + April, a series of intimate photographs of a couple in bed. It will be on display at **LPM** from Sept 18-24, and will share its vernissage with Tim Porter's work, on Sept 5, at 7-10pm, which the now infamous couple may attend. LPM will also house Humanitarianism through Art, a benefit in which the sale of prints donated by local, national, and international photographers will benefit Doctors Without Borders. This vernissage will be Friday Sept 25, 7-10 pm. A++ is **The School of the Photographic Arts**: Ottawa's second-annual contest and exhibition of selected images from part time students. Its vernissage will be on September 18, 2009 from 18:00 - 21:00, and it will be on view until October 4, 2009. **CUAG** has rifled through its collection to present two shows running simultaneously from Sept 14 until November 8. **Conflicted Heroes** explores the interaction of European culture and the Hebrew Bible during the Reformation period through a series of prints and paintings from that era. **Sanattiaqsimajut** - "the Inuktitut word for finely-made objects or art" - is a "major exhibition resending approximately 125 works of Inuit art," including prints, drawings, sculptures, textiles, and early ivories.