

Alison J Carr: Artist Statement

Wish You Were Here: Real Photographs

One afternoon in 2005, I came across a tin full of cigarette cards at a flea market. I leafed through to look more closely at the miniature pin-ups. I noticed the backs of the cards with the clipped-1940s-BBC-announcer biographies of the girls on the cards. I selected all the dancers from the tin (there were actresses, models, swimmers and tennis players I rejected, no one in the tin I had heard of before) and bought all ten. As I walked home, I decided to recreate all the photographs using myself as the model. My desire to explore another identity merged into a kind of wish, 'What if I were this person in the photograph?' The photograph represented such a desirable location that I wanted to be *there*. The details of the location, although totally unknowable to me, were here presented in my hand, as though the top layer of that location were lifted off and frozen. How could I thaw it out and be there?

The original cigarette cards were objects to be held, looked at closely. They were private cards to view, collect and exchange. As enclosures in cigarette packs in the late 1930s, it was presumed that these were gifts for a male consumer. The distance of time created a very different reading of these photographs. Looking at them with contemporary eyes, they look glamorous, innocent, staged and seductive. Imitations of low-key Hollywood portraits are called to mind.

During the making of the project I became obsessed with getting the photographs exactly right. I started with some hazy knowledge of lighting, medium format cameras and printing. I had to research techniques and costumes. I was in the midst of my own fantasy creation, my desires driving me onwards. Baffled onlookers wondered what was at stake. I was so invested in being in the photograph that I did not know either. Until I began to speak about lives I imagined for these women. I had pieced together an independent, well-travelled existence, in a homo-social environment where wits were needed in addition to wages for survival. The male gaze may have been satiated night after night by their stage appearance but the payback made it worthwhile. Dancing on stage. The moment the dancer enters the stage, the symbol for unrepentant female power. Qualities I projected into these dancers I want to claim for myself.