

ELEGIAC PANTOMIME

ARNAUD MAGGS AFTER NADAR

BY PHILIP MONK

One of the most remarkable codas to a career is great Canadian artist Arnaud Maggs's *After Nadar* (2012). I say coda since this was his last work, and one made by the artist knowing that he was about to die: an end-work, therefore. *After Nadar* is remarkable for being so unexpected...and for going against expectation. As such, the two series retain a problematic status, if one can say this of works of such charm and equanimity. They are remarkable because they are seemingly so antithetical to Maggs's whole enterprise and opposed to his whole oeuvre. Remarkable because after a lifetime of works of strict, almost-puritanical taciturnity, where the artist was hardly visible behind the objectivity of the apparatus and conceptual framework of presentation, the artist put himself on display—and, moreover, performed a pantomime.

What was Maggs telling us? Of course, this work is equally taciturn because Maggs is not *telling* us anything, only *miming* it. And miming not only a pose, but a photograph as well. In doing so, he simultaneously reproduces a series of Nadar photographs; he copies Nadar's posing of his subject and he imitates its subject's actions.

Maggs's title (*After Nadar*) is a convention of artwork made in the style of another. Prodding the title, we can ask: who, or perhaps rather what, was Maggs after? He comes in time after Nadar, but also after Nadar capturing his subject Jean-Charles Deburau, and after Nadar capturing Pierrot, too, in the role Deburau played. Maggs doubles this image, but in doing so puts three artists in play: not just Nadar and Maggs (after Nadar), but Nadar, Deburau and Maggs. Identification is double and triple, because Nadar himself, when setting up the original scenario, also identified, like many other French Romantics, with the Pierrot character: the subject before him that *he* comes after—in pursuit of, that is. Not to mention that Pierrot comes after himself, in that Jean-Charles Deburau was reprising the character made famous by his deceased father Jean-Baptiste Deburau, coming later to step into papa's costume and role.

"After" can hardly be taken as a simple preposition here—or accepted with equanimity. After *After Nadar*, the same can be said of Maggs's work as a whole: it is not as straightforward as we thought. We might stop to ask ourselves, in this language

Arnaud Maggs *After Nadar:*
Pierrot Turning 2012
12 Chromira prints mounted on
Dibond 21 x 18 cm each framed
COURTESY SUSAN HOBBS GALLERY







Still from Marcia Connolly and Katherine Knight's documentary film *Spring & Arnaud* (2013)
COURTESY SITE MEDIA INC.

OPPOSITE: **Arnaud Maggs** *After Nadar: Pierrot the Archivist*
2012 Chromira print mounted on Dibond 96 x 75 cm framed
COURTESY SUSAN HOBBS GALLERY

of “after,” who is hunting/haunting and imitating/honouring whom here? It’s like a pantomime unfolding before us. Shh!

In spite of Sophie Hackett (associate curator of photography at the Art Gallery of Ontario) writing that the “series title, *After Nadar*, seems straightforward,” the game is afoot; the hunt is on.

Let me explain the set-up first—the historical set-up, that is. It is disputed whether it was Nadar or his younger brother, Adrien Tournachon, who photographed Deburau between 1854 and 1855 in his characterization of Pierrot. (For convenience, I will designate Nadar as the author.) Nonetheless, the photographs were exhibited at the 1855 Exposition Universelle and published as an advertising portfolio for the Nadar studio. The series is now incomplete. Pierrot is posed in stock attitudes of showing surprise, pain, laughing, listening, imploring, thieving, and so forth. But the most astonishing image is of Pierrot “photographing” an out-of-frame Nadar, sliding a photographic plate into a box camera and indicating with his hand to his sitter: “Look into the lens.”

Pictured on the cover of the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s 1995 book on Nadar, this is the iconic image that Maggs fell upon by accident in 2011. Surprisingly, our artist was not familiar with it since he claims, “Nadar was off my radar.” Nonetheless, it quickly—and quietly—worked its magic.

Maggs repeated the series, but with differences. To Pierrot’s appearance, he restored the ruff that the Deburau *père et fils* had abandoned. He also applied dark lipstick, eyebrows and a beauty mole to the wan makeup, which gave his face a doll-like look, as Hackett noted in her excellent essay on this work, but also lent the mask an allure of seduction. His are not stock gestures, however, but impersonations where Maggs uses props to signify his *own* history. In this succinct autobiography, he offers a jocular view on his professional and personal lives.

On the professional side, we see Maggs/Pierrot as an archivist of his own production, facing tottering stacks of archival photo boxes, sizing up his history and holding in his hand an image of his earlier “other”: one of his stock self-portraits from decades previous. Or in *After Nadar: Pierrot the Storyteller*, we see Maggs/Pierrot reading from a pile of antique journals, the type he collected and, supplanting his earlier portraits, serially reproduced, as if their rescued, battered and stained pages were worthy of portraiture too. To this story we need to listen as carefully as Pierrot does in Nadar’s *Pierrot listening*. Or in Maggs’s *After Nadar: Pierrot and Bauchet*,

we see Pierrot gleefully carrying off an oversize Bauchet film box, the type used for advertising products in camera shops, as if the empty box was a wonderful find. The attitude is exactly that of Nadar’s *Pierrot the thief* sneaking off with a bag of money!

On the personal side, we catch Maggs/Pierrot the musician, sweetly withdrawn in his own world, playing a harmonica. Or in love, carrying roses. Or as a proud collector, clutching in his hands eight commonplace French enamel pitchers: Maggs’s collecting was as serial as his photography. Surely the most poignant is *After Nadar: Pierrot receives a letter*, which reprises Nadar’s *Pierrot with envelope*. In the latter, Pierrot sneaks a peek into someone else’s mail: the envelope is addressed to Adrien Tournachon Nadar Jeune. In Maggs’s image, Pierrot stares ominously transfixed at a letter gripped in his two hands. We can’t see the addressee, but it is one of those black-edged envelopes, the mourning stationery that signalled death notices, taken from a 19th-century collection from which Maggs created his *Notification* series in 1996. There is an exquisitely controlled irony to this image, given Maggs’s foreboding knowledge of his own death: in the pratfall world of Pierrot, Pierrot is receiving his own death notice. Peering into this envelope would make all the other attendant props of this series oblique memento mori.

Of the marvellous Nadar photograph of Pierrot catching up with the latest fad and exposing a photograph, and a photographer in turn, Met photography curator Maria Morris Hambourg once wrote, “Pierrot’s plate-holder presumably contains an undeveloped portrait of Nadar at work, just as the plate Nadar pulled from his camera held the image we see.” I would rather think that, with his eyes turned down in contemplation, Pierrot is imagining the image in the plate he is holding: himself! Posing, he performs an image of himself; he is both subject and producer. Much like an impressionable photographic plate, mime, as Mallarmé put it, is as “white as a yet unwritten page.” Deburau points to a silent “performance” that we eventually see. And the miming magic of photography delivers the image, which Maggs received more than 150 years later.

In the same vein then, Maggs does not just conveniently copy Nadar, adding his own flourish after the master. Rather, he initiates another performance: a mime more complex than meets the eye. Likewise, in his self-portrait, he doesn’t gesture, “Hold still,” but instead, “Pay attention.” We should carefully attend to what he is showing as well as beware of his staged tricks, because the exposure is a wink that the image itself cannot make.

Much like Nadar, who was a man of shifting identities before settling into becoming a photographer, Maggs dramatically reinvented himself as his last artistic statement. And in reinventing himself, he invites us to revisit his past work and look at it anew.

A second series of images, *After Nadar: Pierrot Turning*, does exactly that.



“In a grand liberating gesture at the end of his career, Maggs went from *taking* photographs to *naming* them to *miming* them.”

Arnaud Maggs *After Nadar: Pierrot the Photographer* 2012
Chromira print mounted
on Dibond 96 x 75 cm framed
COURTESY SUSAN HOBBS GALLERY

Pierrot doesn't play a trick on the camera as much as the camera plays a trick on him: pirouetting him 360 degrees and, in the process, draining the expression from him. Just as in Maggs's earlier 1983 *Self-Portrait*, Maggs/Pierrot is shown in rotation, the Paris police having caught up with him: hung silent, sans glee, in a grid of 12 clinical images—the complete mug shot. Thus Pierrot made a straitjacketed appearance in Maggs's last exhibition, an exhibition Maggs himself curated at the Ryerson Image Centre. Was Pierrot surreptitiously snuck into the white cube as a pratfall joker? Miming Maggs (after Maggs the artist, that is, having reinvented himself as a curator), was “Pierrot the Curator” indeed in charge here, in this last performance?

It is amusing to think that the revolving shots might have been a pantomime all along. I'm thinking of the unspoken relation of this photographic carousel to pantomime, etymologically speaking. *Panto*, meaning “all or universal” in Greek, is related to *pantothēn*, meaning “from every side.” Pierrot forces us to rethink Maggs's early work from every angle: his own systematic 1983 *Self-Portrait*, for instance. Clearly, there is a dialogue in Ryerson's “dumb show” (another term for pantomime), as Maggs already hinted at in *After Nadar: Pierrot the Archivist*, a portrait of the artist looking back judgmentally at his old self.

I'm sure Maggs did not intend to undermine a lifetime of work through a pantomimic performance. Yet could it be that the factualist was a fictionalist all along?

This adaptable adventurer was not afraid of change: to move for design jobs in Toronto, Montreal, New York, Milan and Santa Fe; to give up his skill set and switch professions to become a fashion photographer; to switch again in his mid-life to become an artist. Nor was he afraid to set off in blind pursuit of Joseph Beuys with no necessary expectation of success. He caught Beuys's scent in New York through the German artist's 1979 Guggenheim retrospective, tracked him to Düsseldorf and stalked his quarry until the stoic, stone-faced artist relented to being photographed for *Joseph Beuys, 100 Frontal Views* and *Joseph Beuys, 100 Profile Views* (both 1980). While patiently waiting for this performance, Maggs netted the students at the school where Beuys was teaching, resulting in *Kunstakademie* (1980), a serial presentation unlike any other class photo.

Nor was Maggs afraid to make it up as he went along. The iconic Beuys

photographs were not preordained images. One presumes that the strict armature of the works was derived from Beuys's fellow Düsseldorf photographers, the objectivist Bechers, but Maggs's systematic profiling was actually based, before knowledge of them, on the schemas of 19th-century French criminologist Alphonse Bertillon. Beuys's portrait was an intuitive amalgam of Bertillon's mug shot and Carl Andre's *Altstadt Rectangle* (1967), a sculpture of 100 steel plates that Maggs had seen in Düsseldorf while waiting to photograph Beuys.

The Beuys portrait was made the same year as Maggs's monumental study of influential photographer André Kertész, then 86. Maggs was after Beuys, but not in the way he was after Kertész. One he pursued; the other was an inheritance. Yet a preceding legacy pursues a following practitioner. Three decades later, coincidentally after he had also reached 86, Maggs came after himself to curate an epitaphic exhibition of his own work that he did not live to see. Perhaps his selection of four works for this artistic summation was the lens through which he wanted us to experience his legacy: an equal balance of the systematic and the idiosyncratic. For Pierrot was not the only joker in the pack. At Ryerson, *After Nadar: Pierrot Turning* was counterpoint to both *Kunstakademie* and *André Kertész, 144 Views* (1980). But Pierrot teamed up there with another troupe of tricksters, that other oddity in Maggs's portfolio: *The Dada Portraits* (2010). A whirligig duo, together these works turned our point of view of Maggs around.

The Dada Portraits were the result of one of Maggs's happy flea-market discoveries, but treated unlike any of his other paper ephemera *trouvailles*. Instead of typically documenting the pages of these 19th-century French carpentry handbooks, he *reads* these found objects differently—but not for traces of their stories. Now he makes one up instead. (Is this why Maggs is grinning in *Pierrot the Storyteller*?) By merely naming the abstractions of the drawings' exploded lines, he configures a series of portraits. Profiles render Dada men such as Marcel Duchamp, Max Ernst and Man Ray; frontal views depict Dada women such as Sophie Täuber, Hannah Höch and Mary Wigman. Turning from the dervish dance of this Dada colloquy, one suddenly sees their graphic structure haunting the surrounding “conventional” portraits at Ryerson, whose gird-like solidity dissolves into ghostly demarcations. All that is solid melts into air, to be recomposed in a new understanding of the ephemerality of Maggs's enterprise. In a grand liberating gesture at the end of his career, Maggs went from *taking* photographs to *naming* them to *miming* them. In the process, he evolved into that mime artist Mallarmé wrote about, who “sets up a medium, a pure medium, of fiction.” Only here, the medium remained photography. ■

Discover 10 key works by Arnaud Maggs at canadianart.ca/arnaudmaggs

