

# ArtReview



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## Nancy Burson Composites

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Nancy Burson, as every recent photography textbook tells us, is a pioneer in the development of digital imaging. Continuing in 'history of photography' mode, Clampart's selection of key works of the 1980s and early 90s could indeed serve as a minicourse on the topic. Although I fear it would be a rather dull one. Seen from the limited perspective of new photographic technologies, Burson's work has always seemed like a lesson in how science kills art.

Nevertheless, she does banality well. *Lion/Lamb* (1983) and *Cog and Dat* (1983) – a verbal/visual composite of 'cat' and 'dog' – are perhaps the simplest images in technical terms. These mythical enemy pairings of the animal kingdom, the former bearing biblical weight, the latter Disney lightness, are each rendered in the same full-face portrait format of all the composites. Comparisons are thus implicit. The alphabetical mashup of 'cat' and 'dog' in the latter's title offers a neat linguistic parallel for the computer-generated negative that is the basis of her technique. The visual randomness and dry humour of these images-as-information

is most evident here. But when this work is counterposed with the more obviously politically charged composites, such as *Warhead 1* (*Reagan 55%, Brezhnev 45%, Thatcher less than 1%, Mitterand less than 1%, Deng less than 1%*) (1982), the Manichaeon extremities of the Cold War-era take on a bathetic chill.

Brezhnev's huge eyebrows and plump face are distorted to sinister effect by the chiselled good looks of America's Hollywood President. With their combined gaze sliding suspiciously off to the right, Burson's depiction is more film noir than the statistical measurements might suggest. At the other end of the spectrum is *Businessman* (*10 Businessmen from Goldman Sachs*) (1982). This bland embodiment of the corporate world – blank expression, standard haircut, homogeneous European features – is as affectively empty as *Warhead 1* is full. Putting a face to capital, as *Businessman* does, turns out to be just as unsettling for its visual banality as *Warhead 1* is for its open menace.

The generic faces of *Mankind* (*An Oriental, a Caucasian, and a Black Weighted According to*

*Current Population Statistics*) (1983–5) and *Androgyny* (*6 Men + 6 Women*) (1982) have a different kind of emptiness. These are purely informational games, in which Burson's conceptual method is laid bare. While these images always seemed banal in the worst sense when encountered individually, within this larger body of work they find their place.

*Aged Barbie* (1994) is more image manipulation than composite. It's one of a group of four digital distortions in the exhibition where we seem to have swerved into a Twilight Zone of eugenics gone wrong. All too visually dramatic, the effect has more to do with (simulating) a traditional use of directional lighting and focus than the informational approach of the work from the 1980s. With science turned into science fiction, the work has lost much of its critical edge. While Burson's composites work best when the information goes beyond zeros and ones, the use of empty visual data is the necessary conceptual structure that makes this significant work. Siona Wilson



*Androgyny*, 1982, gelatin silver print from computer-generated negative.  
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