'Smile please!'

What used to be a photographer's request is now a given: faced with a lens, our smile reflex is automatic. In the digital age the camera is never allowed to catch us unhappy, even when we're alone – witness the 21st century phenomenon of the smiling selfie.

Is there something a little peculiar about this? Smiling at oneself in the mirror would certainly seem weird, and the smiling selfie isn't so very different – although it is, theoretically at least, directed at an audience to whom the selfie-taker feels free to present herself as she chooses.

What sort of freedom this embodies is one of the questions posed by Pippa Young in this searching exhibition, which explores how contemporary reality is mediated through photography. Drawing on photographs she takes herself, Young's haunting imagery seems closer in spirit to Julia Margaret Cameron than to Kim Kardashian, and yet conceptually it hovers between the two, viewing the contemporary issue of self-presentation through the melancholy filter of art history.

Melancholy doesn't feature much on social media, but it's a mood that has fascinated artists since Dürer engraved his famous image of Melancholia. As in Dürer's engraving, it tends to be associated with mystery, another quality that has been largely absent from contemporary art since being swept away by the bright new broom of Pop. But like the return of the repressed, the combination of melancholy and mystery comes back to haunt us in Young's enigmatic pictures.

What are they doing, her beautiful young people caught in introspective, sometimes anguished poses, with their strange accessories – the stark white liberty caps and gauzy Netherlandish headdresses, the ruffs and turbans made of crumpled bin bags and the veils of transparent plastic sheeting? Without a context, we are left in limbo and the picture titles only mystify us further. Phrases such as Chasing a spider's shadow and Lakes of our motionless days, taken from the Syrian poet Adonis, seem suffused with an eternal longing for what we can't have, that universal sense of beauty in human sadness that the Japanese call 'mono no aware' and the Portuguese 'saudade', and that the Roman poet Virgil epitomised in his oft-quoted line, 'sunt lacrimae rerum' – 'there are tears at the heart of things'.

The protagonists of Young's paintings are not marked by suffering; they are too young for that. She chooses models on the brink of adulthood because they are still impressionable and in transition; with life experiences not yet etched on their faces, they are blank canvases onto which we can more easily project ourselves. In their innocent vulnerability they resemble the teenage subjects of the Dutch photographer Rineke Dijkstra's Beaches series, without the sense of physical awkwardness. Unlike Dijkstra's swimsuited adolescents, Young's youthful models are saved from self-exposure by adopting poses from old master paintings – in particular from the sacred art of Jusepe de Ribera.

No religious message is intended, Young insists; it's just that Christian sacred art has all the best poses. As if to prove her indifference, she recycles Ribera's poses with no regard to context or even gender. In Lakes of Our Motionless Days, the artist's young son falls into the pose of the dead Christ in Ribera's Deposition; in another painting (Goldfinch 5), a young woman in a green dress crosses her hands in imitation of the bound wrists in Ribera's The Mocking of Christ.

A Baroque painter known for his brutal realism seems an unlikely source for these meditative images, but Ribera was a Tenebrist – a painter of shadows – and it's in the shadows that the two artists meet. The subjects of Young's pictures acquire physical form through chiaroscuro effects of lighting which set them in relief from the cut-and-paste arrangement of flat surfaces that typically make up the rest of her compositions.

Her painting practice originates in collage, used as a metaphor for the fragmentation of contemporary life but also as a way of making sense through unexpected connections. She is interested in "the alchemy that seems to occur when context is altered and when fragments of images are combined". Her pared-down aesthetic is more loaded than it looks. At first glance the designs of her printed fabrics and wallpapers may seem as anodyne as the pretty patterns on toile de jouy, but look closely at the background of The Weight of Anticipation and you'll find a repeating vanitas motif of a skull wreathed in cherry blossom. In the dual image Mesmerised by our own noise, in which the doppelgangers are in fact a pair of twins, the right-hand figure wears a fabric printed with classic representations of a madonna, a whore, a cook, a princess and a laundress.

Since the dawn of Photoshop, the collage techniques pioneered by the Surrealists as a way of subverting the mass media image have been freely available to photography, but the question of how the painted image differs from the photograph remains of central concern to Young. Despite their immaculate finish, her paintings lay bare the mechanics of their manufacture. In Imposter, the pixel-shaped squares that puncture the picture surface and threaten the break-up of the subject's constructed identity are visible evidence of the underlying grid used to transfer the original composition from the photograph.

Unlike the artificial constructs of social media, Young's images are deliberately left open to deconstruction. The shifting uncertainty of the exhibition title also refers to the generation of the works themselves. Titles such as Imposter and Self-flagellation reveal the self-doubts at the heart of the creative process: "In a sense," Young admits, "all the paintings are self-portraits."

Like music in a minor key, the deceptively simple paintings of this modern-day Tenebrist are suffused with a melancholy that has the effect of making us feel better. "The wisdom of the melancholy attitude," as Alain de Botton observes in The Book of Life, "lies in the understanding that… your suffering belongs to humanity in general."

In other words melancholy, like great art, is universal. De Botton recommends that "we should pay more attention to melancholy and even seek it out from time to time." It may be far to seek in our social-mediated culture, but it can be found in this exhibition.

Laura Gascoigne

Laura Gascoigne is a critic and commentator on the visual arts.
A former editor of Artists & Illustrators, she contributes
regularly to Apollo and RA magazine and is art critic of The Tablet.