

UK

PHILIP-LORCA DICORCIA

The Hepworth Wakefield

Like his siblings, American artist Philip-Lorca diCorcia is named after a poet. But diCorcia has made his name with photographs, not words. After stops in Frankfurt and Tilburg, this considerable survey exhibition sets 119 colour works made between 1975 and 2012 in a sweep of first floor galleries at The Hepworth Wakefield.

DiCorcia trained under Tod Papageorge at Yale in the late 1970s, having just missed Walker Evans's tenure there. His approach to making pictures, in some ways a reaction to the documentary tradition epitomized by Evans, has been a significant influence on the highly constructed art photographs of the last couple of decades. His stagy colour photographs often verge on the luxurious and seductive aesthetic of his fashion magazine shoots, examples of which are notable absences in this exhibition (as are his Polaroids). The show weaves its way back and forth in time, across genres and geographies, through six discrete bodies of work. In the manner of each carefully directed image, it unfolds like the plot of a play, with diCorcia's own micro-survey, *A Storybook Life* (2003) – a sequence of over 70 images dating from 1975 to 1999 – as the final act.

The exhibition's first rooms hold work from the two most recent series, which are also the hardest to parse. *Upstate* (2009), the central image from the newest body of work, 'East of Eden' (2008–ongoing), shows a delicately fruiting apple tree with sunlight-dappled leaves. It is flanked by bird's-eye views of desolate, dusty landscapes – anomalies for diCorcia, at least at this scale. Other images show his more familiar forlorn figures, backs turned, stares disconnected. Selections from 'Lucky 13' (2004) in the next room show nude pole-dancers dangling upside-down, casting shadows on otherwise empty stages. Their tense musculature freezes over any

erotic energy. Both series are ostensible responses to catastrophic events in America, the financial crash and 9/11, respectively. But as visual analogies these are heavy-handed and, though technically impressive, they feel bloodless – which may well be the point.

Taken about a decade earlier, the 'Hustlers' series (1990–92), for which diCorcia is arguably still best known, make subtler visual metaphors for modern life. Though almost a quarter of a century old, the images feel oddly contemporary, like meticulously researched re-creations of a time that never quite existed. The vivid colours and even glow suggest new – or incredibly well conserved – prints. Their refusal to age as objects is apt given the forever-young men they immortalize. As the well-known story goes, diCorcia paid each sitter – all male prostitutes in Los Angeles – what they'd charge for sex. The titles bear their names, ages, places of birth and the price paid. Some, like *Ralph Smith, 21 years old, Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, \$25* (1990–92), hair coiffed, arms crossed, leaning against an illuminated Del Taco drive-thru sign, look like ironic billboards. There's an uncomfortable, if honest, equity in the exchange, which transforms them into unlikely fashion models, selling nothing but their own images.

Much is made of the slippage between the happenstance of reality and the contrivance of fiction in diCorcia's work. But his control, however striking, over every aspect of some images – set details, poses and, especially, lighting – often stifles. And the game of consistently singling out individuals while systematically denying them any sense of agency takes its toll. His subjects become icons with no mythology, alone but not even lonely.

For me, the artist's best pictures are the ones that acknowledge the temperamental world. There's a discernable release of energy in the two series that follow 'Hustlers', 'Streetworks' (1993–98) and 'Heads' (2000–01), which each contain the vitality of the element of chance. Here the glint of an eye and the life of the street are harnessed by diCorcia's formidable technical control.

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In 'Streetworks', low perspectives take in the clutter of the ubiquitous big city. Flits of recognition and sparks of motivation in faces and postures work in tension with the static formality that anchors the images – blocks of colour or resonant collisions of people and architecture pressed together in flattened frames. For 'Heads', diCorcia mounted a strobe light on scaffolding and used intense flashes of light to isolate individuals from the crowds in New York's Times Square. These unsuspecting models – one of whom famously sued for damages, and lost – have a kind of magical innocence about them as they step into the spotlight. As diCorcia's defence rightfully claimed, such images could not have been made with subjects who knew they were being photographed.

The last room is the heart of the show. *A Storybook Life* collects 70-plus photographs, selected by the artist retrospectively from more than 20 years of work and presented as a single sequence. The first image of an overturned house clues us into the futility of any neat narrative and, like a toppled domino, makes each image fall into the next. Though far from biographical, this is as close as we get to an intimate view of diCorcia. Relatives and friends recur and have a notably different rapport with the camera, even when posed. It's also possible to see diCorcia thinking through these images, trying out perspectives and lighting techniques, making smart visual links that leap decades and continents. This kind of retrospective series often works best as a book and *A Storybook Life* was first presented in that form. But it transfers nicely to the wall. Prints are kept relatively small, allowing for the proximity of curiosity.

In the end, *A Storybook Life* is a way of drawing a circle around an otherwise ungraspable body of work. Like William Eggleston's 'Los Alamos' (1966–74) and Stephen Shore's 'Uncommon Places' (1973–81) it is diCorcia's attempt to make sense of a daunting archive. And, like these expansive series, it documents a certain era of American life and gives us a sustained response to a world that looks increasingly like a photographic image of itself.

SARA KNELMAN



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