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"Matthew Buckingham: Likeness"

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Caterina van Hemessen is 20 Years Old, 2009, 16mm film installation, 12 min (continuous loop), edition of 5.

At a certain point, the voiceover in *Likeness* (2009), one of two new 16mm film installations by Matthew Buckingham on show at Murray Guy, declares: "It isn't possible to make a true portrait of an animal, because animals don't treat their own images as signs of themselves". The statement seems odd at first, given the accompanying film, which consists solely of static shots of a single detail from Diego Velázquez's 1659 portrait of Philip Prospero, the young Prince of Asturias: the face of the white dog seated on the armchair in front of the child.

We are invested in portraiture because we invest portraits with human presence. Based on two important portraits from Western art history, Buckingham's well-researched and theoretically sophisticated installations reflect not just on these works' specific histories but also on how such images might relate to the complex processes through which subjectivities and identities are formed, understood and represented.

Delivered in Spanish (with English subtitles), the text in *Likeness* seamlessly shifts address from painting to viewer and back. At times descriptive and anecdotal, it meanders through history and is peppered with observations and aphorisms on power and portraiture. The younger Philip was Philip IV's much-needed male heir at a time of strategic importance. A sickly child, he died before turning four.

Projected on a wooden crate, amidst pieces of antique furniture wrapped in moving blankets, the musty installation subtly evokes this subtext of an empire in decline.

Caterina van Hemessen Is 20 Years Old (2009) is based on a 1548 self-portrait by the eponymous painter, who is shown at work at an easel. Mirrors, necessary for the execution of self-portraits, structure the installation. The film forensically dissects the image into a series of lingering close-ups of a black-and-white reproduction of the painting. Reflected off a mirror onto a screen, the projection reverses

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the image, negating the inversion required to execute it. The text, distributed across numbered panels that gesture towards a sequential development that the text does not follow, weaves together fragments of van Hemessen's biography, reflections on her place in art history and historical facts about mirrors and their growing importance for painters of her time. The text itself, printed in reverse, is readable with the aid of provided hand mirrors.

In taking as its subject what's considered to be the earliest surviving portrait of an artist self-presenting as artist, the installation affords a moment of self-reflexivity (pun intended) about the creation of artistic identity, apt for a contemporary moment when artistic self-promotion is necessary for success. In fragmenting image and text, however, neither installation provides a full image of its ostensible subjects. Buckingham scrambles our equation of personhood and its representation, questioning the very possibility of a stable identity. As the term 'likeness' suggests, a painted portrait always approaches but is never identical to its subject. Buckingham's elegant and precise installations inhabit this slightest of gaps.