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Faces of time

Joseph Smith is an award-winning photographer whose specialities include the performing arts and social documentary. Like most good things, this book is an accident followed by careful planning.

The former happened when the author came across centenarian Ines Portelli before a shoot in Vittoriosa in 2002. The latter is the six years of studied photography and interviewing that followed.

The result is a sensitive work of art that portrays Vittoriosa's senior citizens in the intimate surroundings of their homes. Each monochrome photograph is accompanied by case notes telling of the person's life. Image and text complement one another beautifully, even as they leave much to the imagination and invite the viewer/reader to construct their own third narrative.

The photographs contain two parallel worlds, and two temporalities. The first is present in the faces of those portrayed. In this sense the title of the book is intriguing. The word 'survivor' comes from the Latin *supervivere*, which means 'to live in addition to'.

The protagonists have done at least one special thing – they've lived past the rest. Their presence evokes the absence of the non-survivors. The photographic aspect adds to this for, as critic Susan Sontag once said, photography inevitably implies a sense of loss.

Indeed, one of the more exciting aspects of the third narrative is that the readers will find themselves imagining a town populated by the departed. In some cases, these include the 'survivors' themselves, some of whom have since passed away. The life-death fuzziness renders the work poignant.

Never pathetic though, for the faces of the book inhabit a second world, that of their surroundings. It is here that the work really comes into its own. Smith's interiors are typically partially visible, which means the eye is invited to extrapolate past the cropped frame and conjure up the world beyond.

The archetype here could well be Angolo Bronzino's *Portrait of a Young Man* (c.1530), in which cropped architectural detail invites the viewer to imagine the rest of a Florentine palazzo.

Bronzino's young man also holds a book as if to tell of his erudition. Likewise, most of Smith's protagonists are surrounded by a number of carefully-chosen objects that tell of their biographies – a set of tools, a naval lantern, a sewing machine, and such.

(Another influence could be Cartier-Bresson's portrait of Sartre, complete with pipe and a bridge in the background.)

All of which might sound terribly contrived and cerebral were it not for one redeeming element, that of complicity. Smith makes it clear that the settings and objects were chosen by him and his subjects, which ultimately means the photographs show people telling their own partial stories. Even if their mouths are shut (perhaps they've said what they had to say?), their settings and objects continue to talk to us.

In most cases, the feeling is of a frame getting ever narrower, with the sitter forced to jettison more and more of their belongings to keep what's absolutely essential.

For Dolores Ancilleri, who as a teenager heeded Dun Gorg's words and has never since faltered, it's a picture of the saint that's closest to her. For Peppi Gellel, who has tailored away the best part of a century, it's his old Singer sewing machine.

The reader is invited to ask a question that is both existential and anthropological: If you could take just one object with you to the afterlife, what would it be?

These, then, are posed pictures in which the photographic gaze is both invariably present and meaningful in itself. It is self-conscious photography at its best, the bottom line being that these stories wouldn't exist without the camera.

This volume is an absolute pleasure to read and look at. We trust that, should the photographer himself shoot a self-portrait in 50 years' time, he would choose to have a camera, and a copy of *Survivors*, at his side.

Dr Falzon and Dr Monteforte are social anthropologists.

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