

Exhibition of the week

Faye Claridge

★★★★★★

Danielle Arnaud

South Bank to Deptford

One needs to put the words together to believe them: photos of blacked-up Bedfordshire Morris dancers as described through the hyper-real figuration of Renaissance portraiture. Faye Claridge stirs up a stew of cultural and personal identity issues with this visually arresting series. Her outsider's perspective on an ancient English form of paganism still in play offers an odd and squirm-inducing shuffle through social stereotypes and representational tropes.

Claridge's portrait subjects do not appear the victims of a theatrical set-up though it is clear she has 'positioned' them – in various bits of Morris garb, as if part of the same hand-made pastoral tableau. The Morrises of yore apparently introduced the black-paint 'mask' in evidence here to maintain anonymity and avoid persecution. Each tarry circle covers just enough of the Caucasian visage underneath to keep the mind moving between the Masons, minstrelsy and the pit. Two knickerbocker'd chaps with kit bags on their heads could as easily be KKK militants or kidnap victims as harmless traditionalists. Conversely, a couple of soot-swiped teenage girls

appear more Bat For Lashes than cult-land kids.

The pseudo-historical nature of Claridge's set brings to mind the different versions of reality captured by the lens-based and the painted portrait while framing the members of this troupe as if examples of a rare breed on the wane. But this is not a photo-essay slice of Middle England, rather a slightly over-staged alignment of past and present values, lore and fact that nonetheless uncovers many human truths in the pictorial distance between 'them' and 'us'. *Rebecca Geldard*



'Descendants of the Unfamiliar', 2009