

The Maths Lesson, 2011

Altered found photograph, 21.4 x 20.4cm

Audio Description © Eleanor Margolies

This is an artwork in portrait format, taller than it is wide. It's a black and white, partially hand-coloured photograph. It is speckled with dots of damage or 'foxing', suggesting that it has not always been stored in perfect conditions. The monochrome print is not literally black and white but is a softer, sepia brown on cream-coloured paper. There is a narrow border around the image. An illegible name of a photographic studio is embossed in the bottom right hand corner, along with the location, Chicago. Together these details suggest that the original photograph is from the first half of the twentieth century.

Julie Cockburn's alterations have made it a disorientating image, asking the viewer to piece together something that has been broken up, so I'll start with the most recognisable part. The lower third of the image shows the arms and midriff of a child somewhere between about five and seven years old. The child wears a loose shirt with pleats, large black buttons and short sleeves. The shirt has been hand-coloured a pale turquoise. The child's arms are folded, resting on a reflective, dark surface. The left forearm and hand is lying relaxed on top of the other forearm, the fingers spread out towards us. The background is neutral, perhaps a paper backdrop, and sits quite close behind the portrait subject.

From chest height up, the figure in this artwork has roughly the shape we'd expect from a portrait –narrowing from the shoulders and rounding at the top of the head.

But the top half of the child's image has been physically cut into precise triangles that have then been rearranged and assembled in a new order. The pale neck and facial features, dark hair and shadows, and turquoise shirt are used as blocks of colour. Most of the triangles are right-angled. Different combinations of them come together or can be read in larger shapes such as squares, rectangles, hexagons, and larger triangles. Wedges of turquoise shirt have ended up where the hair should be; there are triangles of the palest pink that must come from the child's hand-coloured cheeks. It's rather like a patchwork quilt made of fabric of different colours, but at the same time, the features of the human face draw attention wherever they are. A smiling mouth with pale pink lips and small white teeth now sits sideways, its triangular-cut shape pointing towards the child's left shoulder. One upsidedown eye, positioned where the shoulder would meet the neck, looks out at us unblinkingly from a pinwheel of turquoise and white triangles. The other eye looks slightly upwards and is located just above the point where you'd expect the child's right eye in this portrait to be. Some of the triangles float loose, only touching the others at one corner, giving the feeling that you could push them into place, rather like a tangram puzzle, in which geometrical shapes are rearranged to make pictures.

With the title 'The Maths Lesson', this mixed up image might suggest the confusion that maths can induce, but the child's smiling mouth and eyes remain visible even in the rearrangement, and there's a calmness to the arms folded on the table, as if the whirling thoughts have a stable base.

