Cover Up: Artist Statement

In this extended series of Cover Up works, I turn to the cache of Epstein files released in their thousands by the US Department of Justice on 19 December 2025.

I first came across the images in the Guardian, which published the now infamous photograph of Prince Andrew and Ghislaine Maxwell at Sandringham (The Royal Estate). I couldn't get it out of my mind. The Department of Justice was under pressure to show transparency, yet released the image in heavily redacted form, with every figure except Andrew and Maxwell covered by a printed black square.

What stayed with me was the pose: Andrew stretched horizontally across the laps of five unidentified women, Maxwell looking on from above. In the context of the Epstein case the image began to haunt me. The longer I looked, the more it read as the scene of a toppling dictator, still in hysterical laughter, with Maxwell grinning darkly, oblivious to the downfall to come.

I went on to the US website and began searching through more files, collecting further photographs of political figures, including Bill Clinton in a hot tub and President Trump at a party at Mar-a-Lago. The pattern held in every image, particularly those of people with power in business, politics and royalty: black squares over everyone else.
I became preoccupied with what those squares are for. The Department of Justice argues they protect the identities of victims. But are they also covering up for the perpetrators?

I choose not to pass judgement or force an answer on the viewer. Instead I offer the images back to the public in my own language, delicately etching away the remainder of each image so that the black squares come into sharp focus, appearing to hover in front of the picture.

Etching away the rest of the image, including the visible people, creates a frosted and highly sensitive erasure. The surface becomes tactile, almost sculptural. You can see where my hand changes in rhythm and pressure, in lighter and darker patches, smoother and rougher. I ask you to look into the depths of the material and piece the scene back together.

The five works shown at Lungley are the first in this new series of Cover Up works that I will continue to pursue. Through them I trace how these images are shaped by cultural taboo and by their effect on political power, and how they open onto questions of authenticity, international borders, sex and identity.

Within the series, the images also sit in a longer history of censorship. It begins with a still from the 1896 film The Kiss, starring May Irwin and John C. Rice, a scene that was quickly cut at the request of the authorities as public scandal broke.

William Mackrell
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