

“Jennifer Van: Exhibition Review” by David Olivant

For better or worse, trends in recent photography have tended to proffer ever more esoteric, insular investigations of the nature of the photographic apparatus and the science of optics in a Friedian* effort to construct an impenetrable aesthetic fortress for photography. Or photographers, in apparent naivety, veer to a programmatic and journalistic insistence on observable “facts” invariably influenced by social/political orthodoxies.

It is refreshing to discover work that takes a more humanistic, existential stance, that unapologetically deploys the human figure, that absorbs the properties of photography into a meaningful speculation on individual consciousness. Enter the young photographer, Jennifer Van, whose large digital photographs of the human figure, in subtle variations of symbolic movement and gesture, printed on cotton rag paper sustain a painterly sensibility that seems heretical to many of her peers.

While there are suggestions of other photographers - Muybridge- jumps to mind - they are filtered through painters like Carriere, Manet, Magritte and Bacon. The long exposures that capture the soul of a movement, the result of which can never be predicted by the artist, because she forms her own subject, conflate physical gesture with painterly gesture. In painting we infer the human agent from the smears of paint; conversely, with Van’s photographs we infer the camera as agent - a simulacrum of the human eye - from the evidence of human presence in the photograph. The more exaggerated or sweeping the human gesture the closer the sensation of painted swipe, again a la Bacon, that both instantiates and erases the body and the vehicle of its appearance, (printing ink mimicking paint).

Thus, the photographs on display- “Asperity “and “Divergence”, occupy a dialectic of embodiment versus erasure as if ephemerality is somehow caught in the act. This generates considerable pathos, hinting that mortality is somehow implicit, somehow spent, used up in every movement that we make. This makes the existential stakes very high indeed and implicates the viewer in a gentle but disarming dance of death.

This dialectic comes to a head in the six large banners of silky faille that are suspended in implied temporal sequence from the iron latticework of the gallery ceiling. Van’s vexed, hard-won but ultimately seamless conflation of bodily and pictorial materiality is heightened here by the more insistent temporal element, derived from our likely false assumption that the images are stills from a video. Here the entanglement of subject, (the human body or fragment thereof) and medium, is given a narrative extension that makes explicit the performance aspects of the works on paper. We might be tempted to discover affinities with some of the work of Yves Klein and body art in general, but I feel this would be largely beside the point. Nothing so literal is implied and these works are only incidentally records of a performance. We are no more invited to reconstruct an original *mise en scene* than we are with Van’s works on paper. All the photos in this exhibit are singular in that they conceal any pathways back to their source; the source is not the point.

In these works, aptly named "Seethe", the viewer is confronted with more of the figure than is typical in the works on paper, but the sense of distancing from the human figure is compounded by the fact that these are photos that behave rather like video stills, printed on fabric. The figure itself is more obviously involved in a narrative but that narrative is resolved back into the mechanics of making the piece, albeit in a novel manner. To be clear, while in the works on paper, we get the sense that the figure is being formed by the act of photographing itself, in the "Seethe" group it is as if the black ink is invading the body from the ground up as a sort of virus, as if the very materials of art are replacing those of the body, as if the human figure is being literally smothered or replaced. More significantly it creates a drama of physical instantiation that resonates at the descriptive and material levels of the piece itself. Signifiers and Signifieds constantly switch places, not as a kind of linguistic game but as way of enmeshing the drama at all levels of the photograph.

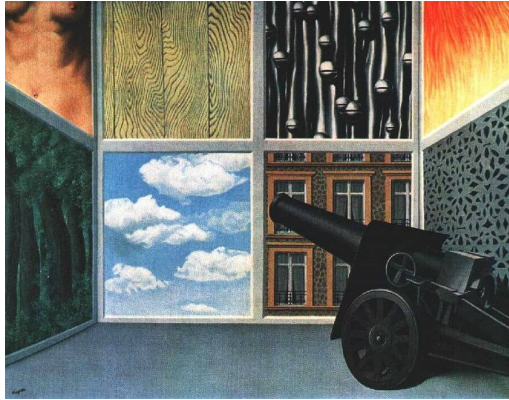
In "Waves" and "Ripples" two related square images each composed of nine identically sized squares with twilight skies, frame cropped images of the artist's hands. This is a radical departure from earlier photographs whose sole subject is the artist in blurred, gestural movement. There are resemblances to the kinds of metaphor established by Magritte in his grided pieces like "On the Threshold of Liberty", "One Night Museum" and "The Obsession" and embellished upon by Jerry Uelsmann, but with Van the surreal aspects of the metaphor are downplayed, the implied fenestration creating structural expectations that are then gently upended. Still, this is Van at her most surreal and the deft cropping, always a factor in her work, here allows the central hand images to seriously defy scale norms. The loss of the knuckles at the junction of proximal phalanges and metacarpals effectively severs the fingers in "Waves". The cupped hand gesture in "Ripples" suggests that the stormy crepuscular clouds have emanated from a magical Prospero-esque gesture. In "Waves" the hands thrust forward in abrupt convexity, like the central boss of a shield, whereas in "Ripples" the hands provide a concave gathering point for the errant nimbus clouds. Of course, the parallels between clouds and fingers are very ancient, as in Homer's "Rosy fingered dawn"!

The tilting of the implied camera viewpoint of these skies, from immediately beneath - the position of the camera in relation to the sky, to immediately frontal - the position of the viewer in relation to the wall mounted images of the sky, also unsettles expected hierarchies, and unlocks a metaphoric potential which the artist always steps back from realizing, like the delayed climaxes in Wagner and Richard Strauss. The musical analogy seems apt because, as in much earlier work by the artist, such as the "Seethe" banners, a temporal succession is implied. While this is essentially linear in "Seethe", in the sky photographs it is a subjective, poemagogic, compressed form of time that shares with late romantic music a sense of groundswell, or rather "skyswell"! There is a sense of pulsation as if the images emerge only to vanish and reemerge slightly changed in an endless but slowly drifting cycle of tainted remembrance. The dominant mood is one of gentle regret and loss, of the waning forces of enchantment, a muted and strangely silent *Gotterdammerung*.

- David Olivant

References:

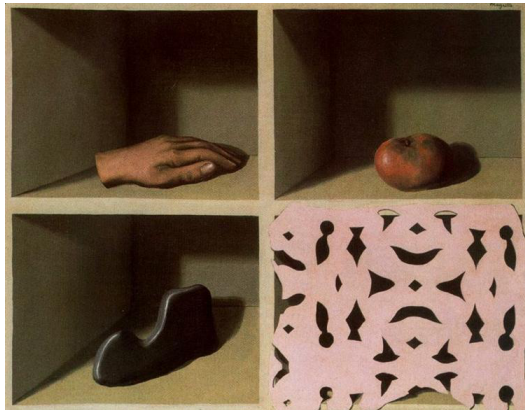
Friedian* Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood"



Rene Magritte
"On The Threshold of Liberty"



Rene Magritte
"The Obsession"



Rene Magritte
"One Night Museum"



Jerry Uelsmann