

FEMININITY

May 16 - June 27, 2020

Nobuyoshi Araki
Candice Breitz
Barbara deGenevieve
Richard Kern
Ugo Rondinone
Weegee (Arthur Fellig)
Anonymous

The view of women in art history, be it in painting or photography, is dominated by a masculine viewpoint and goes hand in hand with power, dominance and desire. FEMININITY brings together photographic works from the 1950s to the 1990s that embody and address this patriarchal view, but also repeatedly disrupt it.

Richard Kern's works serve that voyeuristic view. His legendary New York Girls photo book, published in 1995, in which he portrayed primarily naked women in their own intimate surroundings (here: Anna with Cigarette, 1993), is a contemporary document of the New York underground. Kern's transgressive works between pornography and punk alternate between the self-determination and coolness of the protagonists and the position of power of the camera of the self-proclaimed voyeur: „If the model is the exhibitionist then I am the voyeur.“

Weegee's (Arthur Fellig) perspective corresponds to that of the investigative reporter. Known for crime scene recordings and accident photos from the 1930s and 1940s, his flashed photographs of the streets of New York and L.A.s satisfy the viewers' curiosity in the sense of a paparazzo. The Gold Painted Stripper (1950) comes from his photo book Naked Hollywood: Weegee in Los Angeles, with which he changed his main motif in the early 1950s and from now on, instead of crime, poverty and accident sites, photographed stars and starlets with all the great promises of Hollywood: „Now I could really photograph the subjects I liked. I was free.“ That the backstage scene of the golden stripper was shot in Denver and not L.A. is not surprising if you follow Weegee's interpretation and manipulation of truth, in which a crime scene could be polished up with a little fake blood.

Nobuyoshi Araki's Tokyo Nude (1989) alternates portraits from the red light district of Tokyo with cityscapes and architectural details. In his image studies, he repeatedly puts himself in the picture and is actively involved in the process, often as a sexual act. „I consider myself a“ subjective „photographer. I try to get as close as possible to the subject by putting myself within the frame.“ Araki's diary-like black and white photographs of Japanese bondage, his domestic cat, the honeymoon trip and his wife's cancer death exceed the boundaries of intimacy because they are decidedly subjective and too close.

Common to all three positions is that the negotiation of the (female) body takes place via the male gaze, which in the case of photography is synonymous with the camera lens. Ugo Rondinone's series I don't live here anymore (1995), on the other hand, is an attempt to dissolve the gender duality and hierarchy confirmed by photography. In the appropriation of fashion advertising, he uses digital montage to replace each model's face with his own, which further enhances the artificiality of the advertising photography. The male artist subject as the author himself becomes the subject of the picture and looks at the viewer from a fluid body. The title of the work contains not only a physical, but also a geographical connotation— and ultimately, in the case of the stars and stripes appearing here, perhaps even a political one.

Candice Breitz's Rorschach Series (1997) also uses the medium of photo montage. Instead of black ink, as in the eponymous projective test procedure for depth-psychological diagnostics, she uses pornographic image material to mirror it on the axis of symmetry: „I made these works by simply taking a fragment of a porn image, mirroring it on a Xerox machine, and recomposing it alongside this reflection of itself.“ The series of works is part of Breitz's photographic works of the 1990s, which use fragmentation, destruction, montage and reconstruction, causing sexual and ethnic stereotypes to collide (Ghost Series, 1994-96 and Rainbow Series, 1996). The bodies and their sexual (or cultural) attributes dissolve and form new hybrids from set pieces: „There's no denying the fact that these are still overtly sexual images, but while they seem erotic, we no longer know where to insert our fingers and penises, or which hole is the vagina and which hole is only a mirrored armpit.“ The biased, expectant look of the viewer is exposed and disappointed. Instead, they are offered a free projection surface in the very sense of the Rorschach test.

A disappointment of the expectations between text and image can be observed in Barbara DeGenevieve's Porn Poetry Series (1996-97): photographs of not always clearly gendered body parts are juxtaposed with explicit sexual poems. The subtle nude photographs do not coincide with the clarity of the texts, which read like from a porn plot. DeGenevieve's work is devoted to (trans) sexuality, gender, ethics, and pornography and includes photography, video, text and performance. When dealing with central questions about positions of power, sexual dominance and social class, she often crossed moral boundaries while categorically rejecting self-censorship. This is most clearly noticeable in the process-oriented work The Panhandler Project (2004-06), in which she offered homeless men a nude shoot for money and an overnight stay in a hotel, and thus, as for a woman, demonstrates the dilemma of exploitation, objectification and sexualization (here the socially weak and Black man).

The black and white photographs taken anonymously (around 1960-70) captivate by their casualness. A group of (trans) women in lingerie devote themselves to a love play in different constellations of two. In the way they bend each other, cling to each other and press each other to the ground lies a playful form of fighting, like wrestling. Their exaggerated gestures, facial expressions and the mode of sensibility are reminiscent of the camp of the 1960s. It is clear that the photographer must be part of the scenery. The feeling of intimacy and authenticity is mainly created by the fact that the models do not pay attention to the camera. They are in the very moment and are absorbed with each other— there is no inside or outside.

The exhibition FEMININITY shows the view of femininity in pop culture, advertising and pornography of an era in transition from very different perspectives: lustful, lascivious, voyeuristic, yet emancipatory and transformative, up until the dissolution of a binary gender model with the potential for any form of projection, self-determination and sexual freedom.

Text: Miriam Bettin