Out Side: Power, Pleasure, and Anxiety

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OUT SIDE: POWER, PLEASURE AND ANXIETY

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I recently figured out when I first aspired to become an artist. It was not the moment I picked up my first paintbrush or when I saw my first image materialize in the darkroom. It was when my parents divorced at the age five. Before this moment had been smooth sailing. I lived in a neighborhood full of teenagers, in a house that was always the center of activity, complete with mud fights, watching meteor showers, and baking cookies. I was a part of it all regardless of my age. But this changed the moment my parents split. No one came over anymore and my parents acted strange. Suddenly conversations took place around corners and always in whispers. They started to speak to me as if I were different, like I was a child! I would ask questions and in their answers I could sense they were holding something back. What were they hiding from me? Why? It was painful to realize that I was only a child entitled to know only certain things. The moment I first sought to be an artist was the moment I learned it was up to me to discover the truth. No longer could I trust every word from my parents and no longer was I one of them. I was a kid and it was alienating.

This was my first experience as an outsider and the basis, I think, for my exploration into the dynamics of power that appear ubiquitous such that it seems we have never existed a moment without power being exerted over us. My work aims to engage and highlight the anxieties stemming from differing systems of power that one finds in relations of family, work, class, race, and gender. As a woman, however, power structures act on me in a specific way, and I seek to explore this through photographic images. As a medium, photography in particular has traditionally been used in the service of advertising that aims to manipulate the desires of consumers. As a child of the 1980s I am in the first generation whose experience growing up was dominated by photographic images. These images in large part told me how to be as a woman. I’ve spent my life trying to figure out what that means and where I stand in relationship
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to the telling. My aim is to use this medium that has exercised power over me as a woman and subvert it or, at the very least, make its power problematic for the viewer.

**Men in Bed**

My earlier work dealt with many of the same issues of power and the anxiety and uncertainties of being subject to it. In an attempt to combat the sense of alienation accompanying being a female in a patriarchal society I turned directly to the source of my anxieties. I started taking photographs of men. My first attempts at this were in Binghamton, New York. I made a series of portraits of men in their beds (fig. 1). The idea was that by photographing men in each of their safe havens they would feel inclined to open up and perhaps give up some power. The aim was a reversal of roles from what I normally felt with men with whom I was not intimate; and by and large, it worked. With the camera, or rather the instrument of the gaze, I was able to gain the position of power and control. I could get close to these men in an intimate setting and remain safe behind the gaze of my instrument. But because most of the subjects were friends that were young and attractive, and because I did not want this work to become another series about youth or beauty, I pressed onward in my work.

**Motel**

Two years later I began a new series where I was meeting strangers from craigslist in motel rooms to take their portraits. I took the same idea from *Men in Bed* but upped the ante. These were strangers I would find on a website notorious for facilitating hookups and then meet these men in a place commonly used as a place to have sex. I did, however, take precautions by always bringing someone with me to these meetings, but they were never present inside the room while I was photographing. With *Motel*, I found I was able to maintain the same control I had previously; but I also found myself photographing these men differently than my friends. For example, I mostly worked with one man who in our first session together I quickly became bothered by his gaze (fig. 2.); even from behind the protection of my gazing camera. It was a
standoff of gazes and I eventually resorted to covering his face and body with sheets and blankets (fig. 3). The next two sessions the same man brought two different women with him, of whom I felt he was using them as tools to parade about his masculinity for me and my camera’s gaze. I covered them up; but not without sensing that he was trying to seduce me albeit in a very oblique way. That is, while in emails there were potential hints, during the shoot he was silent and only took orders. Eventually, however, I found that I was seduced, but not by him. I was seduced by my photographs of him. This was an important discovery for my work because it highlighted the power of the image and my confrontation with that power, which I was now learning to wield not simply behind the camera but before the image.

**Charmers**

In another attempt to understand issues of power, I made a series of portraits with women who owned snakes. Part of my inspiration for this series came from the recurring dreams of snakes I had been having since I was fifteen, and wherein I would typically find myself surrounded and struggling to escape. I had these dreams so often that a friend gave me a replica of the Minoan statue the *Snake Goddess* (fig. 4). However, whereas I thought the snakes in my dreams to be a sign of sinful temptation, such as it is in the story of Adam and Eve and the fall from paradise, she thought that, like the goddess, I was channeling my power as a woman to tame the snakes and protect the home and community.

I began to consider the power of these recurring dreams and how the historically complicated relationship between women and snakes that continued to play in the female psyche and its relation to power. I went to the source and found women who possessed serpents with the aim of raising an important question for my work: Can women understand themselves as holding a certain power and even dominion over nature. Is there a possibility of woman as the master of the phallic snake or must she serve as the temptress symbolizing the downfall of man? Is she something else entirely beyond this power dichotomy? (fig. 5)
My present series entitled *Out Side* turns to address power in terms of the subconscious pleasure and anxiety of looking at images. In particular, here my work calls into question ideas of representation in a capitalist consumer culture dominated by advertising, which operate by means of subliminal messages. Images of this sort are so prevalent in our culture that they appear innocuous, such that the ways in which they press upon our subconscious often are not critically considered. Advertisements, for instance, frequently send messages of inferiority and create the desire to make up for such manufactured shortcomings. Also quite common in advertising is the use of a female or female body part to enhance the desirability of the product. This works by suggesting either that like the woman the product is sexy, desirable, etc or that along with the product one buys access to an object of desire; and often that object is women. Either way, the net result of these tactics is the same: they confuse our orientation both to other humans and to actual objects. What was once just a beverage, a pair of shoes, a car, etc is now a gateway to a better life, a beautiful women, etc.

What is more alarming about the power of such images, however, is that while we know that this notion is false—one does not get the girl in getting the beer—such images offer the fantasy and promise of filling the gap, the hole between the beer and the girl and so nevertheless seduce and exercise their power over us. But this is, in part, a power to confuse; for such images manufacture a desire for a special sort of object, one that cannot fulfill its object or promise. We all know this. Still, perhaps due to their sheer ubiquity in our age, such images can, I think, stir a deep anxiety in us; and they *can* do this by not simply leaving us with an insatiable hole to fill but by doing this in our full knowledge that its objects are without weight or value. The power of such images is their ability to question and to make us anxious over our knowing our desires as our own. It is with this question in mind that I have devised my own visual index to study various anxieties typically manipulated by advertising.
Out Side: The Hand

*Out Side* begins with concept of the disembodied hand, which made its first appearance in my video *Please Enjoy* (fig. 6). The video centers on a pink-nailed hand reaching out for various objects and touching them seductively. Simultaneously shown is a woman’s mouth and hand, also with pink fingernails, applying lipstick. The video ends with her laughing maniacally. My strategy with the hand connects with *Please Enjoy* in which I deviate from methods of advertising that would indicate that a critical response is necessary.

For instance, when in *Please Enjoy* the liquid is poured into the glass it is rough and splattered suggesting something other than the typically portrayed bubbly champagne. When the woman laughs at the end of the video her lipstick is applied very poorly and her laugh maniacal. Why is she laughing? Is she in an unstable mental state? Has she perhaps been pushed to this mental state for having been equated to an object herself? Or is it perhaps because she believes that human yearnings can be satiated by weightless objects without genuine value? Or perhaps she is laughing merely because she applied the lipstick poorly. The cause remains unclear. But by adding an element of humor here, even if maniacal, the work, I think, is made easier to swallow, more pleasurable; and this serves to implicate the viewer in disseminating the capitalist notion that women are like objects; that objects can fulfill basic human longings of others; an alarming thought and source, as I see it, for much anxiety.

I continue making light of such underlying cultural assumptions. Most importantly, this is a comment on the position of women in patriarchal, heteronormative consumer culture. The hand is a disembodied female hand featuring fake plastic nails to underscore gender and express that she conforms to traditional western standards of beauty. Plastic nails, could be understood as a way to express femininity and differentiate her from competition and possibly...
win the attention of men. This visual motif of the female fragmented hand has been used most significantly in the US in mid 20th century advertising (fig. 7) to sell a variety of consumer products.

Both works, the still photograph of the hand Hover (fig. 8, ) and Please Enjoy, finds its influence in Agnes Varda’s 1963 film Le Bonheur. The film, shot in highly saturated color, portrays a young attractive family living the ideal life. The wife is completely satisfied with her humble domestic life. The husband, though equally as happy, has an affair; but when he confesses this to his wife, she commits suicide the same day. Three months later his mistress accepts his proposal for marriage and the domestic bliss resumes. Woven into the narrative is a montage of the wife’s hands performing domestic duties (fig. 9) like cooking, sewing, making a bed, tending to the children, watering flowers, etc. To underscore the objectification and fragmentation of women, at the end of this sequence there is contrasting a shot of a hand unlocking a door and then a man walking into the frame attaching his hands to the rest of his body. The montage is quite striking because it is the only scene when any person is not portrayed at least three quarters.

To be sure, Varda’s film is a shocking portrayal of how women can be easily replaced in a family unit; and yet the only suggestion that the film is critical of this idea is through the montage. This was suggested by Rebecca DeRoo in her essay Unhappily ever after: Visual irony and feminist strategy in Agnes Varda’s Le Bonheur. DeRoo argues that Varda was mimicking common advertisements of the time which featured similar styled images of hands completing household chores. DeRoo states, “Where magazines sought to glamorize domestic chores and represent an ideal to emulate, Le Bonheur interrogates such idealizations of happiness, exposing the detrimental effects of housework on women.”¹ These effects, like that of advertising, objectify and tie a woman’s value to her service to the man and family.

¹ DeRoo, Rebecca. “Unhappily Ever After,” Studies in French Cinema 8, 2 (2008); 189-209.
In both works I pick up on both Varda’s tactic as well as advertising’s to decorate an object with a woman to make it more desirable. This makes it so that both the woman and the object serve the same master and function, namely that of being consumed by men in service of their longings. Unlike advertising, however, my work attempts to call into question the purpose of the desire conferred by the hand such that one can ascertain the absurdity of the questions that are now imposed: Why are these objects being touched? Are women actually turned on by these objects? The disembodied hand sensually touching objects or floating in spaces now embodies something more sinister.

**Out Side: Baby in the Corner**

Similar ideas about a woman’s status and objectification were behind my work *Baby in the Corner* (fig. 10). This photograph features a gas station cherry pie, spread open and sitting awkwardly in a corner. The pie’s center is bright red and gelatinous. Historically cherry pie has been slang for a virgin’s vagina. I was made aware of this term from Warrant’s 1990 hit *Cherry Pie* with the lyrics: “She’s my cherry pie/Cool drink of water such a sweet surprise/Tastes so good makes a grown man cry/Sweet Cherry Pie.” To make sure that everyone is clear on the reference, the music video included a shot of a piece of pie falling into a woman’s crotch. I engage the same visual metaphor but punctuate it by placing the cherry pie in a corner to mimic the shape of legs.

In the title, I reference a popular line from the 1987 movie *Dirty Dancing* “nobody puts Baby in the corner.” Patrick Swayze’s character says this to the family of his girlfriend (Baby) after they have apparently “sat her in the corner” because of the shame that she has caused her family by having a sex and/or a relationship with the Swayze’s character. In my image, however, Baby is firmly in the corner. Even worse, she is on the floor. One may be seduced by the detailed textures or the complimenting colors of the red center, blue wall, the brown floor, the symmetrical composition. Concurrently, one may become uneasy by the possible vaginal
association. Because there are no clear guideposts to direct the viewer on how to feel or what to learn from this image it can at once, I think, induce both pleasure and anxiety.

**Out Side: Stay Golden**

Such contradictory feelings can also be felt with the image *Stay Golden* (fig. 11). In this image there is an unidentified object covered in a shimmering gold shroud floating in a dark space. The object covered resembles many things. Some suggestions that I have heard from my peers include a pair of breasts or amputated legs. This indicates that, once again, there could be here could be another representation of disembodiment although this time it involves body parts associated with sex, hidden and drawn out by the gleaming golden cloth. Regardless of what is underneath the image is surprisingly beautiful due to the glimmering gold, voluptuous shape and the seeming weightlessness of the object. The titled references a line from the 1983 movie *The Outsiders*, when a dying Johnny, tells his best friend Ponyboy, to “stay gold”. Johnny is telling Ponyboy to hold on to his innocence. This could be understood in relation to the image in a couple of different ways: the beholder of the image is being protected from something obscene underneath the cloth, or it could act as a warning to not interpret the image as obscene or stay pure in your thoughts. Either way the tension caused by being both beautiful, disturbing, and unknowable, like others in this series, can cause conflicting emotions.

**Out Side: Old Wood**

The image in the series *Old Wood* (fig. 12) contains a similar feeling of unease but it was inspired by a unique anxiety, for the series and in my general oeuvre: the passage of time and eventual death. This image depicts a large piece of petrified wood which at first appears to be floating in space. If you look closely you can see brown plaid cloth underneath the wood. This object itself needs little decoration or context to unsettle the mind. It is an image of an 3-D representation of the remains of a living organism. Death preserved forever reminding us of our eventual and inescapable fate. Conversely, it could also symbolize transfiguration or evidence
that profound change is possible. The existence of opposing meanings is underscored by the supposed weightlessness of an object known to be usually very heavy.

**Out Side: Sensor**

As I have been demonstrating Out Side presents images that contain opposing meanings. Meanings that attract and repulse, that cause both pleasure and anxiety simultaneously. I have named some of the causes of these conflicting feelings (advertising, sexism, death, consumer culture); such that the question persists: how does one establish the authenticity of one’s desire as one’s own and not that of consumer capitalist culture? The video Sensor (fig. 13) illustrates this search for the elusive concept of the self in an image saturated environment.

This video is about a woman looking for the source of her desires to find her authentic self and searches within. She is, at first, on the outside looking in. This is represented by the outside of the home, followed by a closer shot of the window. She walks in search of something. She is transformed by the sight of a moth when she stops walking. Now she realizes to look within and there is a shot of the back of her head. She can see herself but only from behind. The flashes represent the difficulty of this task by obscuring her clarity not unlike the constant influx of information we receive each day. The man’s chest is an object of desire but one that the hand can never actually touch. In the end, this character falls short of really seeing herself because is obscured by darkness. This raises the question whether we can never know if we are our authentic self, because we, ultimately do not know if the source of this self originates from within or without. Sensor situates the human as a conduit for information that once absorbed cannot be undone. She is trying to locate herself within the massive onslaught of information and or images. She powerless to the visual environment around her and as the hand reaches out for many things in the video it never touches one.

**Contemporaries**
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Other artists today that pose similar questions about power structures are Laurel Nakadate, Barbara DeGenevieve and in relation to objects Maury Gortemiller. Both DeGenevieve and Nakadate are attempting to reverse the gaze and use men as their subjects to achieve this. In Nakadate’s *I Want to be the One to Walk on the Sun* (fig. 14) she dances around to Britney Spears *Oops I did it again* in front of three different men. They are all older and lonely looking men. As she dances they either watch or dance with her. She is clearly in control of the situation but it also appears that she is making fun of them. I end up feeling sympathy for the old men instead of empowerment for women. Perhaps empowerment is not goal of her work but I think that is where we differ. I don’t intend to reverse the exploitation of women by in turn exploiting men.

This is in contrast to Barbara DeGenevieve’s work *The Panhandler Project*. In this work she photographs black homeless men nude in hotel rooms (fig. 15). Although this sounds completely exploitative, DeGenevieve is actually confronting liberal political correctness as a source of power that also marginalizes. Liberals suggest that is wrong to photograph homeless men because they lack agency. She challenges this notion in photographs and video but offers them $100, meals, and a place to stay for the night. In the video’s and the photo’s it is clear that these men are indeed not being exploited by her and both parties are enjoying a mutually beneficial experience.

Another artist with whom has similar thoughts about the anxiety of objects is Maury Gortemiller. In his series *Do the Priest in Different Voices* presents a series of mundane objects which evoke the same contradicting emotions. In his image *Kraft Singles* (fig. 16) there are american cheese slices lined up in the shape of a cross on a dry cracked mud surface. One is both repulsed and seduced into the picture by the lush and grotesque surfaces on one hand and on the other the image suggests that American that put faith in ideals that are artificial. Or
perhaps that American’s worship cheap processed sweaty cheese. Both subtexts are laughable and frightening at the same time.

Conclusion

Now that I am older, I understand the motivation of my parent’s wish to protect me from nastiness that comes along with divorce. They did not want to reveal their own struggle for autonomy amongst each other to their child, who’s relationship was undoubtedly about to change with both of them. Their desire to hide the power struggle from me is not unlike how the powerful deny the battles exists today. Unlike my parents, who were trying to protect me, this is not protecting anyone, but rather controlling them. It is clear with my work that I seek to expose and poke at the powerful forces that surround me. I look at men to see how I fare when I gaze right back at them. I look at woman to see if they indeed carry the mythical and biblical presumptions about them. And finally most recently I look at mundane objects as way to expose the suspicion that we maintain cultural principals and desires that might not be our own. The photographs are evidence that I look critically with both a grin and a grimace.
Bibliography


Figure 1. Ben from Men in Bed

Figure 2. Untitled from Motel

Figure 3. Untitled from Motel
Figure 4. Snake Goddess 1600 BCE
Herkalion Archaeological Museum

Figure 5. Ava from Charmers

Figure 6. Stil From Please Enjoy
Figure 7. Advertisement for Bacon

Figure 8. Hover

Figure 9. Still from Le Bonheur
Figure 10. Baby in the Corner

Figure 11. Stay Golden

Figure 12. Old Wood
Figure 8. Still from Sensor

Figure 14. Laurel Nakadate still from I Want to be the One to Walk in the Sun

Figure 15. Barbara Degenevieve from The Panhandler Project

Figure 16. Maury Gortemiller, Kraft Singles, from Do the Preist in Different Voices