



September 6th, 2011

Guest Contributor: Caris Reid “Locked Eyes and the Female Gaze”

Stuff: Still Life Photography is closing in a few days, and for our final guest contribution for the show, we've asked artist and Dossier Journal contributor Caris Reid to expand on the idea of the photographer's gaze. Caris focused her investigation on the female gaze expressed through the camera's lens and through the painter's eye.

Interview with writer Alissa Bennett and artist Aneta Bartos, by Caris Reid

I had been thinking about the concept and possibilities of the female gaze when Paddle8 approached me to do a guest contributor post. I had just started a new series of paintings dealing with the male body and male beauty, and I kept hesitating about how I was sexualizing my subjects. Even though I was just applying the historical conventions that have been used in depictions of women for centuries, there was something about the experience that caused me trepidation.

Photographer Aneta Bartos (whose work I find incredibly inspiring) and I had been discussing this topic, and we both felt there is something still left that needs to be “outed” in regard to female desire. What is the pre-existing vocabulary for female desire? What does it mean for a woman to assert her sexual longing and to objectify the male body? For this project, I wanted to pull together a group of images by female artists who are freely projecting their desire onto the male form. The images selected explore the vulnerability, fantasy, intimacy, dominance, affection and exploitation that can exist between a male and female counterpart; they explore the range of possibilities that can be articulated when the female perspective of sex and desire is (finally) granted an active seat.

Alissa Bennett: Well one of the first things I said to Caris is that the images (particularly yours, Aneta) feel really homo-erotic. Why do you think that is? From my perspective, it seems like it's because women don't have the tools to discuss desire in the same way that men do, so we are kind of dealing with a language that already exists outside of ourselves.

Aneta Bartos: It doesn't come as a surprise to me that artwork dealing specifically with sexual representation of male nudity is often assumed to be created by a man, whether homosexual or heterosexual. There have only been a few female artists who have managed to have successful careers that deal specifically with male nudity, and even fewer who deal with the idea of the possibilities of an objectifying female gaze.

Caris Reid: I don't think, culturally, we're use to images that sexualize men outside of gay culture...

A Bennett: Right! I think women artists who deal with desire usually do so in a more romantic way... I think that the works that you are proposing here deal with the male body in a specifically erotic way that is really unfamiliar.

CR: To be fair, I think it's a subject many female artists have delved in, but typically the results have remained a bit more private.

A Bartos: Right. “male gaze” is a very well established male-power phenomenon—it's established to the point of total invisibility, but the idea of a female gaze is relatively unexplored and often controversial. It's an obvious battle of power struggle between the sexes.

CR: But do you think these images are egalitarian? I guess the gaze, by nature, is not egalitarian— there is always a power division between the viewer and the viewed.

A Bennett: That's the thing about the idea of any gaze; it's never egalitarian—there is always an element of objectification, but in the series you are presenting you are using typically masculine constructs to interrogate how that objectification can be reversed and what that reversal means.

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A Bennett: Art historically, women have always been interpreted as “The Muse,” while men are the makers of meaning, right? And the idea of “The Gaze” is basically the idea that there is a power hierarchy between seeing and being seen and that seeing is always granted the power position.

CR: Exactly, that's something Laura Mulvey talks about. I don't think that anyone could argue against the idea that mainstream visual culture is still very phallogocentric. What we are suggesting here is that the female erotic gaze must be accommodated within culture.

A Bartos: It's a bold and natural way of looking at sexuality from a female point of view; it's about expressing carnal enthusiasm and making room for “unacceptable” and “unladylike” thoughts and behavior.

A Bennett: Carnal enthusiasm! I love it! Caris, what made you start thinking about these issues?

CR: I've been working with female sexuality as an underlying theme in my work for the past year or so and studying the visual language that had been developed in depicting the female form, sexually, in early Victorian eroticism. I stumbled upon the work of Guglielmo Plüschow (who was photographing males in a very sexual way at the turn of the century), and it made me start to question why there are not more examples of works that deal with the male body purely in terms of beauty created by women. It's more commonly a homoerotic theme.

A Bennett: I think that women artists are frequently compelled to explore sex through adolescence. It's great to see adult subject matter. I know a lot of women who really get into gay porn. Aneta, your images really look like gay jerk off porn!

A Bartos: Really?

A Bennet: YES!

A Bartos: (laughs) Maybe I should start watching. Sounds like a great inspiration for me!

A Bennett: YES! You'd love it! How did you guys get your subjects to agree? Are they typically men that you have had relationships with?

CR: I can't answer for Aneta, but I think most of the men in these images, with the exception of Sue De Beer's work, were sexually involved with the artists making the work.

A Bartos: The first guy I asked to masturbate for me became my boyfriend... I think it's easier to work with someone that you already know sexually, but I have worked with guys that I never had any sexual relationship and it was such a rush.

A Bennett: That is the rush of voyeuristic control!!

CR: Totally, but in these images, there is a range. I think there is a tenderness and intimacy that exists in some of the works.

A Bennett: Yeah, there is totally a range! Like, Caris, your paintings feel much more tender. They are about something else, I think.

CR: In all of my work, I'm fascinated by intimacy, internal worlds and breaking down the boundaries between people.

A Bennett: Do you think the images would change if you weren't sexually involved with the subject? Would it still be possible to get a guy to pose for you if there was no intimacy?

CR: Yes, but I think the images would be about something else.

A Bennett: Because the male gaze is sort of related to the idea that you can achieve this relationship without intimacy and just through power. Are any of the works in this series aggressive?

CR: Does the mood change when an element of the female is added, like in Skye's photo, Jeremy and My Knee?

A Bennett: You know, I was just looking at those, and there is not very much of his body in that image if I am remembering correctly.

CR: Yes, mostly his face and arm, and her leg, but it feels very exposed, and intimate.

A Bennett: How do you think the image would have changed if it were her hand instead of her knee?

CR: I think it becomes less about sex and more about power.

A Bartos: I think sex is power.

CR: Absolutely. What I always struggled with from the feminist movement in the '70s was the suggestion that in order for the female to establish power, there had to be a movement toward neutering her sexuality. I often feel that the model of the powerful and liberated woman is lacking in sexuality and that bothers me.

A Bennett: I agree with you, Caris. What is it about sex that women can't quite get a hold of? Again, I have to ask if it's about embarrassment or shame.

CR: I think there is a huge amount of embarrassment and shame associated with female desire.

A Bartos: Totally.

CR: Even though it seems so puritanical to deny that instinct. Sexuality is such an outward energy, it's a desire to expand, express...connect.

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A Bennett: Caris, explain to me in a few sentences what the “Female Gaze” means.

CR: I see the “Female Gaze,” in the context of these images, as being an empowered female freely exploring and projecting her desire onto the male form and through that action, constructing meaning.

A Bennett: Does it have to be done in a public way for meaning to be generated?

CR: No, but there is a pervasive patriarchal visual language, and at this point in time, that requires expansion in order for a new visual vocabulary of female desire to emerge.

A Bennett: I like the idea of this expansion—it's not about letting women use the tools that already exist, it's about making room for them to develop and use new tools.

CR: I don't want to simply mimic the existing asymmetry, that's not interesting, and doesn't seem like any sort of forward movement.

A Bennett: Right, the system doesn't need to accommodate women, women need to institute a new system.

CR: It's not about a hierarchy of the sexes, it's about sexuality. We have written a lot here about aggression versus tenderness, and maybe the truth of the matter is that we can't approach the idea of a new gaze through polemic. It can't be either or—it has to be something new.

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