

From LOST WKND

interview with William J. Simmons

1. In an interview with Photoworks you said something that absolutely floored me with its clarity and depth and prescience, “I work with photographs of women, not women. A photographer has a direct relationship with the model, I have a relationship to the found image I work with.” Do you feel that there is an expectation, especially for women artists, that any art dealing with female bodies must necessarily be “about” women or feminism? If so, how do you assert and navigate the complex relationship of your themes/content with the formal/historical innovations you are investigating?

My work is about looking at photographs, and yes, that includes looking at images of (women’s) bodies. I am a feminist, but I don’t want to make artwork that offers solutions. The artwork is more like a set of symptoms. We can decode and contemplate society through art but at the same time, art does its own thing.

I wanted to make the point that I don’t actually cut up women, I am only rearranging photographs of women. On top of that, I didn’t even take the photographs, so I have never had any relation to the women depicted (or to pin-up photography) except as *a viewer* of the images. So the work is about being a viewer – in this case a viewer of photographs of pin-up models. At no point does it involve women directly. There is no dialogue with anyone else. I am trying to investigate the act of looking – how we look and how we interact with images.

2. Following up on this, I’ve always thought an interesting vein of your work is not the specifically female-centric imagery, but the cyborg-like allusions you make in works like *Hold* (2015) that combine bodies with machines and objects – not unlike Laurie Simmons or Lynn Hershman Leeson. Are your images, in this way, some kind of amalgamation of genders, just as they are an amalgamation of mediums?

This is a great question, and something that I have perhaps not thought about directly while making my work. In contemporary (digital) life, the body is certainly in flux and fuses with the machine - in creating online multiple identities through social media and through online pornography. The body is viewed in bits, never as a whole. As the physical body disappears, gender becomes more uncertain.

Your question also prompted me to go and read Donna Haraway’s “Cyborg Manifesto” which was great – such an early realization of the fundamental changes digital technologies would bring about, like this breakdown between the physical and the non-

physical. Here the cyborg, “the illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism”, breaks down ideas around gender and female identity in order to create a more fractured state.

Often our attachment to machines comes so infused with a naturalism which is so imbedded in our thought processes that we don't even realize our entanglement. Recently I had to remind a student (making work about 'women and nature') that her work was actually shot with a camera, and that she could consider reflecting on her relationship to technology as well.

3. Your photographs are often characterized as dark or sinister. I thought of Greer Lankton's show last year at Participant, Inc. and how many critics thought similarly of her dolls. The curator, Lia Gangitano, told me, however, that Greer thought of her creations as friends and family, not as anything scary. Do you love to live with your images? Do ever you create something that unnerves you?

I do love to live with my images – I like to imagine my images in domestic spaces, quietly impacting on day-to-day life. Probably most artists feel a deep affection and intimacy with their creations. I like to be fascinated but also a little bit shaken and stirred by art. When I was a child, my parents had a cubist-style painting that in my mind depicted a nude woman holding an extra pair of (unattached) legs. It was not a comforting picture, but it certainly fed my imagination (in a way that only unnerving pictures do).

4. Your recent installations in *Daydreams are nicer than T.V.* (2015) and *Home-town Item* (2015) seem like a departure from your photographic work, but they are, in my mind, more akin to an extension of your frequent interest in absence. This connects to your always-interdisciplinary urge – such as working with Siobhan Dance Company in London. I wonder what you think about the trite, but always interesting, question so central to a high capitalist society – what is the role of the photograph and/or photographer in an age of ubiquitous images?

I think the recent installations, as you said, are not departures from my photographic works – they do indeed elaborate on absence. To make the work, I took elements from within the found pin-up photographs (like textile patterns) and re-constructed them in three dimensions, in the process letting them mutate and change into something slightly different.

There also seems to be a strong relationship to a previous series, *pornography/forest_pics*, in which bodies were removed from hardcore pornographic images, often leaving blankets, cushions and other fabrics to remain in the pictures, standing in for the absent bodies.

In these new works I am having to consider the one-to-one encounter that happens between the viewer and artwork in a gallery space and how the work sits in three dimensions.

As photographs are more and more ubiquitous it seems that more and more artists/ photographers are stepping away from making 'simple' photographs and instead messing around by making photography interact with other mediums and methods of working. I see lots of great work right now that explores the tension between the two dimensional and three dimensional.

5. There seems to be a resurgence, at least in the United States, of interest in neo-*noir*, especially with *Twin Peaks* coming back for another season. You can even see this in the worldwide phenomenon that is the cigarette-smoking, faux-femme-fatale Lana Del Rey. There is a fabulous pleasure in watching something successfully skirt glorious melodrama. I feel that you have all the intelligence of Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* with none of the hyper-intellectualism heaped on that series by critics. How does the filmic factor into your practice on the level of emotion and affect, not just source material?

I don't think of my work as particularly filmic. As Sherman was playing around with the stereotypical imagery of b-movies, I have tried to play around with mainstream erotic imagery, from 60s pin-up photography to contemporary internet porn. As in Sherman's work, there are links to ideas around performance and transformation. I am interested in artworks having a transformative aspect, both in terms of changing or mutating imagery and a strong interest in process. Like the filmic, my images need to inhabit a place which is somehow believable even if it is not real.

Unsurprisingly, I am a huge fan of David Lynch and there are common aesthetic links to 50s/60s noir. Interesting to my practice is also Lynch's *Inland Empire* - an astonishing feat circumnavigating the digital collapsing of space and time. This figure of the 'lost' woman repeats in my series *Drape* (in which the woman's body gets partially covered up digitally, by cutting and pasting the background drapes over the woman). My extension of these drapes hides us from our view, but at the same time she slips away and perhaps exposes her to some imaginary outside. As the pixels cover her up and we can no longer see her, can she be seen somewhere else? Christian Metz writes in "Photography and Fetish" that the photograph is an "instantaneous abduction of the object out of the world into another world, into another kind of time". In *Drape* there has perhaps been a second abduction, of the model into yet another world, into another ambiguous zone. There is not just an off-screen around the image, there is an off-screen within the image.