

Fashion Fictions

...Exactly what [Lisa] Lyon is doing in each photograph is always somewhat vague, as is her reaction to what it is that she's doing. With one hand covering a breast and the other hand pressed to the back of her head, she is both stereotypically feminine and yet, with bulging veins and practiced muscles, she seems unexpectedly masculine. The pose is narcissistic (as one has grown accustomed to in soft porn) but there emerges a contradictory message of resolute purposefulness in her face and stance. A great deal of theatrical attention is paid to the metaphorical and symbolic content of the photographs. But the precise context within which we have voyeuristically discovered her is left ambiguous. It's like remembering only one frame from a movie but forgetting what came before or what followed. The "dogmas of fiction and reality" do in fact get lost, but the question is for what purpose? And what remains in their absence?

The eroticism in the Mapplethorpe photographs and in much of fashion photography stems from the same source: their absence of context. The exact location, both geographically and narratively, is kept purposely amorphous...

...The issue, with both Mapplethorpe and the genre of fashion photography, is how successfully the two impulses of fear and desire...

...What this means for Mapplethorpe and fashion photography is that (a) they are accurately referring to the fundamental lack of context that is post-modernist, and (b) they both draw on the one remaining source of symbolism that can even try to claim a universal understanding: psycho-sexual imagery.

...When the fashion model is located against some generic plaster wall in some unidentified country, wearing a facial expression that conveys nothing of her specific thought, that photograph is, with heightened theatricality, revealing the anxious state of contextless society. The same thing occurs when Mapplethorpe puts Lyon against a similar wall: with G-string, large straw hat, and summertime shoes, one is not quite sure where she is or what she's doing. All we have is an isolated and disconnected presence and our reaction to it. She is as alone in her unrelated present as we are in our unrelated present looking at her. Time stops. This is the photograph's connection to psycho-sexual imagery.

And this is also where the problems begin. By isolating the image in the unrelated present, the viewer is likewise thrown into that same contextual lack of location: it is that place where dread throws us backward into our own absence, our own ultimate confrontation with our isolated selves. Eroticism pushes us into the present –the present of our specific desires. That instant of sexual oblivion, where the identity of the separate self is momentarily lost, is the tease with the boundaries of uncontrolled (uncontrollable) primary urges, and exists only in tandem with the restraining taboos against it.

...there is an important thing lacking: fear of the impact. For ultimately, everything is controlled and pre-determined in both. They fail to understand that anything that suggests erotic excess always implies disorder. Instead we are given highly staged and artificial photographs where not even the vaguest hint of disorder or decay allows itself to be shown. The "naughtiness" in both Mapplethorpe and much of high fashion is so stylized as to be verging on cynicism.

...The fact that there is a question of insidious dishonesty here doesn't really get examined. The same thing occurs in Mapplethorpe's photos and fashion ads. Would Lyon have any claim to the sexual assertion of aggression if she had not donned the muscles of a man? Is it only by virtue of "maleness" that she escapes the servitude of feminine slavery? By presenting an image that uses the stereotypes of "masculine being equated with muscles, tough stances, sexual aggression" and "feminine equating luxurious clothes, long fingernails, demure stances, and sublime sexual receptivity." Mapplethorpe becomes the ultimate conservative.

...For if women are unable to successfully assert any sexual aggression without being "male-like," there must exist a tautology between "female-like" and non-assertion, and what results from this is an ultimate re-assertion of masculinity equating assertion and femininity being equated with submission.