ROXANA MARCOCI
DISTURBING FAMILIARITY

THE UNQUIET IMAGES

Disturbing familiarity
Interview with Roxana Marcoci

Roxana Marcoci: Let us begin by discussing the conceptual underpinnings of your practice. How did you begin making your first pictures? Why photography? What was the triggering point, the realization that using the camera could be your voice in the world?

Valérie Belin: I began making my first pictures around 1984, when I was a fine arts student. The history of the art was a major part of the instruction. This period was still very marked by what we called "conceptual" art. American minimal art was also part of my early influences. Why photography? Perhaps for the ability to be in direct contact with the real through an experience, and the ability to immediately obtain a visible result. So, I became interested in "things," in their existence and their manifestation through this process of objectivization that is photography. My first works were photographs of "traces," and then of light sources (sunlight, fluorescent tubes…). My work then centered on the photography of objects that were transparent (glass) or reflective (mirrors). I chose these motifs in order to avoid the anecdote of form, as though what mattered for me was to penetrate to the heart of things.

One could say, in fact, that those pictures of quotidian objects in glass and of mirrors pointed to analogous modes of seeing, reproducibility, and analysis, in short that they made reference to the materiality of photography itself.

The primary concern of this work was matter, and it seemed to me that a kind of symbiosis existed between the purely luminous essence of these objects and the nature of the photo graphic medium

itself. These photographs of glass objects or mirrors were less photographs of objects than of their light spectrum, a fixing of the light emitted by their bodies onto the sensitive surface. The body of these objects then appeared to me as something inescapable, and here I am thinking especially of a series of photographs of airplanes in flight, which I took from the runways at Orly airport. Photography imposed itself as a means of existing. The camera became the tool that I used, like the typewriter for writers. It became a system, and my method of working.

And the pictures of planes, no doubt, engaged the idea of framing. Photographing planes in flight breaks down the traditional standpoint. It sets a way of seeing in motion. We'll get back to this cinematic aspect of your work. For now, let's focus on your series of black and white pictures of wax mannequins that you started making in 2003. This motif belongs to a sweeping history of avant-garde film and photography—one to which you will be returning again and again. In the Surrealist Manifesto of 1924, André Breton cites the modern mannequin—a lifeless object that makes one wonder whether it may not be in fact animate—as an example of the "marvellous." What drew you to this type of portraiture?

Before this series of wax mannequins, I set about photographing "objects," and then actual "bodies," in the physical sense of the word. I am thinking of the bodies of dead animals photographed in the refrigerators of the Rungis market, and of the frozen bodies of bodybuilders. These inanimate bodies are equivalent to objects for me. Then I began portrait series of live "models" by imposing the same procedure on myself. It involved eliminating all emotion or reference to a "humanity" of any kind. I then naturally transitioned from portraits of models to portraits of mannequins, which have the advantage of already being "modelized." Of course, the mannequin is an ambiguous "being," which evokes a "marvellous" world, and as such it naturally belongs to the surrealist arsenal. In this world humans and machines have the same status. However, my intention was not to situate myself in this genealogy. I would say instead that photography is perhaps a "naturally" surrealist practice; I am thinking notably of the work of a photographer such as Eugène Atget, who was considered a "surrealist" after the fact, whereas his original intentions were purely "documentary."

True, and although Atget asserted, "These are simply documents I make," it is clear that he did not separate documentary intentions from artistic ones. Linked to Atget's visual compendium, a prevailing theme in your pictures of mannequins relates to types, or rather to the diversification of accepted typologies of the self. Would you say that these portraits engage the question whether the "I" of portraiture is singular or plural, fixed or positional?

Yes, to put it simply, I would say that when I took photographs of live models, I sought to reduce them to their archetype. In the case of the photographs of wax mannequins, I set out from an existing archetype (as it happens, that of the woman) in order to reproduce it as such. But these two exercises lead to the same result. Incidentally in French, there is only the single term of "mannequin" to designate both a live model and a mannequin for a shop window. In these series, it was as though I wanted to reduce all humanity to a simple identity. The portraits I made are not "psychological," they only show visible characteristics, as in medical or legal photography. It was in this spirit that I produced the portrait series of transsexuals or Michael Jackson lookalikes. These series evoke the desire to be another, but they are also symptomatic of a certain type of globalization, which leads to wanting to resemble an archetype. In these portraits, it was a matter of clearing out any reference to a specific personality.

As photographic subjects, the Michael Jacksons, the Transsexuals, and the Bodybuilders are at once appealing and forbidding. They make me think of David Cronenberg, the Canadian filmmaker and unsurpassed auteur of the "body horror," whose films often explore the possibilities of radical physical transformation. There is a phrase that you used in the context of these works that intrigued me. What did you mean when you referred to the "paroxysm of representation"?

The body is where pleasure and horror operate. Both can be intellectual, but their representation is expressed through the image of the effect produced on the body. Horror cannot exist without a body or an image. The paroxysm of horror can be reached only through the paroxysm of its representation. As these are series of lookalikes or bodybuilders, there should be a kind of equivalence between the abuse inflicted on the body and its representation. For lookalikes, the paroxysm is reached when the expression is fixed; for bodybuilders, it is reached at the moment of ultimate contraction of all the body's muscles. It is at this moment, the climax, when the photograph must be "taken." It must nevertheless be admitted that film offers many more sensorial possibilities; photography is more intellectual, and leaves much more room for the imagination.

Let's move to another facet of your work: color. With the "New Faces" portraits, in 2006, you introduced color in your photographs. What decisions or distinctions do you make when using black and white versus color film?

In general, black and white photography produces an effect of "reality," one could even say of surreality or hyper-reality. In fact, hyperrealism in painting is said to be photographic, and we note that numerous hyperrealist artists painted in black and white to stress this effect of reality. Black

and white photography represents beings in their most minute details and imperfections, all the way to the grain of their skin. It was this principle that partly guided my work until 2005. I began using color in 2006, especially since I aimed to produce portraits of beings that were perfect, imaginary and sublime, and therefore without life. Black and white photography would not have allowed me to achieve this objective. My approach has always been of a more pictorial rather than photographic nature. The rendering of tone in color is very different from the rendering of shadow and light in black and white; it is closer to sfumato or unione, the canonical painting techniques of the Renaissance.

One year before you started working with color film, David Batchelor published Chromophobia (2005), a book in which he analyzes the ingrained resistance to or fear of contamination through color, a cultural phenomenon that has pervaded Western intellectual thought since ancient times.

Color is first and foremost an aesthetic and not a "naturalist" choice. It is also a technical choice. I opted for black and white also because at a certain period, it was the only technique that allowed control over the rendering of prints. Before the spread of digital prints, control over the rendering of colours was in fact very limited. In 2006, the ability to digitize negatives and to master the color saturation of images before proceeding to printing made it possible for me to consider using color. Today, I generally proceed by shooting in color, and I make the final choice after the fact. Certain series are mixed, as I use both black and white and color. In fact, my approach is not different from that of directors such as Wim Wenders or Jim Jarmusch, who have alternatively used black and white for certain films and color for others, or that of Jacques Tati, who for instance produced Jour de Fête in both versions. Technology today enables many possibilities. The choice is never simple and rational, it is often the result of a long period of experimentation and hesitation, before it finally ends up imposing itself.

Tati is a great example. Not only because he played with every function of the film medium, but also because he confronted a contemporary set of values: the overreliance of post-war society on technology, and the advent of mass media spectacle. In terms of experimental, processual choices, I know that in subsequent series such as "Black Eyed Susan" (2010), "Brides" (2012), and "Bob" (2012), you introduced the technique of digital superimposition. In the 1920s and '30s there was a surge of analogue experimental techniques—multiple exposures, photograms, light-space modulators, typo photographs, and photomontages—that artist and Bauhaus theorist László Moholy-Nagy collectively coined as the "New Vision." What was your intention here? To disrupt the integrity of the picture? Or complicate the subject's identity?

I use these techniques to make viewing the image more complex, more disturbing, less immediate, less evident, less univocal... This is simultaneously part of a process of abstraction and of reification. I proceed through accumulation, by adding information. The familiar aspect of the thing viewed becomes evasive. We "do not recognize" what we are seeing. The picture becomes confused, it loses its apparent obviousness, its reassuring familiarity. It's as though the disturbing procession of falsity, emptiness and even morbidity rise to the photograph's surface. Experimentation is inherent to all artistic practice. There is no such thing as "pure" photography. These manipulations were connected to the medium used (light, film...). Digital technology only increased these possibilities. My intentions are determined by the same logic of experimentation, given the new capabilities offered today by digital technology. But this endlessness of possibilities also makes things more complex, owing to the disappearance of reference to a particular medium. Technologies today are hybrid. History nevertheless remains a point of reference that I take into account in my experimentations, insofar as it creates a meaning.

Tell me more about your working process. Do you have a team assisting you in setting the lighting, casting the models, shooting the picture, tuning in the post-production phase? In other words, would you say that you "direct" rather than "take" photographs, engaging with systems of production that are cinematic?

I previously work alone, but that is no longer the case today, as my work has changed scale. Thus, I call on a team for all aspects of my work (modelling agencies for the choice of models, florists, decorators, make-up artists, lighting engineers, assistants, laboratories, specialists in digital technology and special effects…). I proceed in series, and I generally conduct a single project at a time. A project can be produced over the course of an entire year, even longer. The production of a series is actually similar to a cinematographic production. It is therefore production work, which includes of course a large amount of "direction."

Artists such as James Coleman, Phil Collins, Nan Goldin, and Chris Marker have reinvented still photography by temporalizing it in distinct ways through slide shows, long takes, and montage. Would you say that the mise-en-film of photography and the advent of digital technologies have produced new forms of subjectivities?

Photography is a representation of space, but also of time. All photography intrinsically includes some narration and fiction. The relation between film and photography is obvious; film is naturally a kind of slightly perverse extension of photography, especially when we think of the notion of editing.

The development of new technologies indeed raises the question of reference to a medium, whose nature is increasingly hybrid, and the process less and less comprehensible. Today we can make animated photographs, or very short sequences of film. Film today is viewed in a continuous loop. I would say that the development of new technologies simply offers more capabilities than new possibilities. As for the question of subjectivity, we must remember that photography has never been objective; therefore, it simply amounts to new forms of the same lie.

Thinking of photography in the expanded field, I'd be curious to hear about the installation you created in 2011 in Rio de Janeiro. There you reprised the "Black Eyed Susan" pictures as backdrops over which you projected a moving image accompanied by electronic soundtrack. Then, in 2013 you morphed the "Michael Jackson" pictures into a series of tableaux vivants for a live performance at the Centre Pompidou. The migration of your still images across different supports is again unmistakably cinematic and performative. Can you speak about the interrelation between image making and performance?

For the installation produced in Rio de Janeiro, I took into consideration the specificities of the space (gigantic), but also those of the medium (in this case the medium of video). The installation is reminiscent of the art of stained glass during the time of the cathedrals. To the fixed image, which is "multiplied" in this instance, I added "noise," which is specific to the video signal. Sound within the image, but also sound accompanying the image. The presentation of photographs in a space always imposes consideration of this space and the spectator. Moreover, performance is a way of presenting my work "in flesh and body" by means of stage direction, by inviting the viewer to discover the humanity of the models I photograph. But it is especially an additional way of highlighting this ambiguity that is at the heart of my approach, which situates models between the living and the inanimate, the original and the imitation. The procedure concentrates the gaze on the image's surface of production, where the human gives way to artifice, and reveals the power of the icons represented. In choosing to simultaneously and exclusively stage different Michael Jackson lookalikes, the performance emphasizes the dialectic already at work in my photographs. The performance presents itself as a visual score: a series of portraits of the same thing, which plays on the contrast between the humanity of the performers and the emptiness of their image. It also shows my taste for popular culture as well as the derealizing effects of globalization. With this series, I deliberately explored the subject of the simulacrum. The people photographed are supposed to be lookalikes of the American pop singer, but the very nature of this model immediately distorts this exercise in resemblance. Because he was the protean figure par excellence, because he had become master of transformation and appearance, Michael Jackson was in a way only a copy of himself.

Representing imitations of the singer is a way of showing the vertigo of the directing, where we find inextricably tangled the true and the false, the authentic and its reproduction, the subject and its reflection in the mirror. It is a mise en abyme of the photographic process and its power of infinite duplication. In this project, I explore the grotesque and invite reflection on the emptiness and absence at the heart of every image.

Indeed, we are speaking of an endless horizon of representations, or of copies without an original. Let's refocus on the mannequins, because here is, I think, a sentence that reveals a lot about your practice. In a reference to the "Black Eyed Susan" series, you say: "Any gaze projecting stereotypes has the power, through its banality, to reduce the mystery of a being. I never develop a preconceived idea about my subject. All while staying at the surface of beings, I explore the codification of feminine beauty during the 1950s." I'd argue, in fact, that you are deliberately overturning codified mannerisms to experiment with the artifice of womanliness. Is your critique of social stereotyping informed by feminist theory?

We could indeed say that these experimentations aim to explore the "artifice of womanliness" and to "overturn codified mannerisms." In the case of the "Black Eyed Susan" series, in a way I "added" some (through the choice of models, make-up, hairstyling, ornament, and decor). For the latest series of mannequins, I started out from an existing stereotype, but I added disturbing elements by seeking to produce an opposite effect, through the superimposition of a geometric design, almost as though I were drawing on an image on glazed paper. Nevertheless, I do not think that one could say my work is inspired by a feminist theory, insofar as my work has no pretention of being "political" or of "protesting." My approach voluntarily remains distant and ambiguous; it is not very different from that of Pop Art artists, whose works can be seen as a criticism—or on the contrary as a celebration— of consumer society. I do not take a favourable or unfavourable position regarding my subject, and I want to remain on the surface of things "plastically." Moreover, it is a fact that there are few female artists, and that a work by a woman is, due to a kind of fatality, often considered "legitimate" only if it is reduced to "speaking" about the condition of women. My goal is to not subject myself to this form of social determinism. However, as a woman I am naturally sensitive, more or less consciously, to certain subjects that are notably connected with the question of representation and stereotypes, and which concern women to a greater extent. Since they are "portraits," it is impossible to eliminate questions of stereotype and ambivalence.

In portraiture, the issue of denaturalization is critical—it provides a rupture with both the stereotype and the archetype. The surrealists made good use of it, but it also creeps up in the context of

cyborg aesthetics that informs the contemporary practices of a whole generation of post-Pop artists as diverse as Robert Gober, Lynn Hershman Leeson, Tony Oursler, Charles Ray, Cindy Sherman, Laurie Simmons, and Gillian Wearing. In the age of digitalization and biotechnology, mannequins can return as cyborgs. Do you see your work within this genealogy?

My work indeed has things in common with the artists and surrealist works you mention. We can indeed see a search for a cyborg aesthetic in the portraits I have produced, I am thinking especially of the masks, the Michael Jackson lookalikes, the bodybuilders, or of the portraits of transsexuals, models or mannequins. I have also sometimes made reference to an aesthetic of the avatar—in the sense of metamorphosis, of the transformation of an object or a being. In the Hindu or Buddhist religions, the avatar is a divine incarnation; it is also a term used in video games for the player's "incarnation." Nevertheless, if there is sometimes an element of "grotesque" in the choice of my subjects, there is also an element of the "sublime," the sublime being able to become the grotesque, or vice-versa. I play on this ambiguity. My distance is the same when I photograph a mask, a wax mannequin or a live model; the resulting portraits are equivalent. Regarding the artists you referred to, my work is perhaps less "expressionist" or "sensationalist"; I think I stay more on the surface of things, of appearances; my work is not critical, it is simultaneously distant and invested, for I am sensitive to the subjects that I photograph.

I'd like you to comment on the logic of desire built into the subtlest, most nuanced details of your new series of pictures of mannequins, the "Super Models" (2015), based on a collection made by the mannequin designer Adel Rootstein. Why have you settled on the typology of the "calendar girl"?

I chose these mannequins because they are part of a "realist" collection; they are copies of live models, and seem "truer than nature." It is this realism that prevents them from being grotesque. I already used Rootstein mannequins in 2003, but the approach in this new series is different. In 2003, I was playing on an effect of "illusion," while for this new series, it is more the "mechanical" and "dislocated" aspect of the mannequins that interests me, and I'm looking more to arrive at a certain form of fantasizing. I therefore chose this series because of the theatrical and mannered expression of femininity they represent. These mannequins reminded me of portraits by Otto Dix. It is most certainly due to a happenstance of marketing that this series is called "Super Models." The girl from the calendar (like those from the Pirelli calendar, the tire manufacturer) is the object of a trivial mythology in the world of photography; she can be the object of a desire that is socially and visually

acceptable. We could also say that these mannequins are like an incarnation of the woman. Woman or puppet, I exploit this ambiguity.

What about film? You once made a cinephile reference to Hans Richter's 1947 feature Dreams That Money Can Buy. This film's plot consists of seven surreal dream sequences signed by Richter, Max Ernst, Marcel Duchamp, Man Ray, Alexander Calder, and Fernand Léger. Léger's dream presents a mechanical romance between two animated store-window dummies. Can you elaborate on the relationship between the perturbing mix of the animate and the inanimate, the abstract and the real?

The title of the film is rather evocative… Moreover, it includes elements that are familiar to me: flowers (artificial?), jewellery (fake?) … I like this idea of mechanical romance, that puppets can have feelings. The transition of the object to the living (and the opposite) is a fairly recurrent theme in all kinds of fictions, and the source of many fantasies, as illusory visions or imaginary situations. It is also the power of photography, of giving back a semblance of life to that which no longer exists, or of mummifying the living.

One of the great mannequin manufacturers of the 1930s, Lester Gaba, started out as a soap sculptor, but then produced the "Gaba Girls." These were life-size, realistic carved soap mannequins modelled on film stars like Marlene Dietrich, Greta Garbo, and Carole Lombard. At that time, the mannequin was used to project a lifestyle, a look, a persona. Avant-garde art is replete with such instances. Oskar Kokoschka, for instance, commissioned the doll maker Hermine Moos to construct a life-size simulacrum of his former mistress, Alma Mahler. And in 1933 Hans Bellmer made his first doll in Berlin under the erotic spell of his young cousin, Ursula. He was, of course, conversant with Jacques Offenbach's fantasy opera Les Contes d'Hoffmann [The Tales of Hoffmann] (1880), in which the hero, maddened by his love for an uncannily lifelike automaton, ends up committing suicide. Bellmer published Die Puppe—a book of ten photographs documenting the stages of the doll's construction— creating a stir among the surrealists who recognized in the subject's automated, mechanized forms its subversive nature. Can you say a few words about the hybrid signifiers in your pictures of mannequins?

The examples you cited show the extent to which this is a recurring problematic. I return to The Tales of Hoffmann, which you cited, and more broadly to the Freudian concept of "the uncanny" or "disturbing familiarity," which is at work in my photography. This irrational feeling can occur, for example, through doubt as to whether an apparently living being really is animate, and, conversely,

doubt as to whether a lifeless object may not in fact be animate. This unease can also occur in the moment of doubt when we believe we glimpsed someone other than ourselves in the reflection of glass or a mirror. Photography can be this tense mirror in which we do not recognize ourselves. This is the paradox at work in my photographs of mannequins.

If historically photography has been complicit in the objectification of women, the question remains what counter-representations might be possible? I'm thinking of the software ruptures that you introduce in overlaying abstracted patterns on the mannequins, much like a mask. Can you define your interest in hiding, revealing, masking, doubling, and performance? I'd say that this is a very effective way of deconstructing the binding status of representation.

One of the ways of arriving at this counter-representation is by taking a distance. In a first series of mannequins, produced in 2003, I opted for a "hyperrealist" representation; the idea was to provoke a phenomenon of attraction and then revulsion tied to the discovery of a simulacrum, of playing on this notion of "the uncanny" I just mentioned. It is this same idea of "distanciation" that I apply in my latest series, but through graphic or plastic means. I used a geometric pattern, even a "decorative" one in my last series of mannequins, just as I used a "floral" design in the "Black Eyed Susan" series in 2013. We can consider this as a stylizing effect, as it can be found in the art of stained glass or Art Nouveau, for instance. It is a way of giving life back to something that has none, an attempt at sublimation.