

FEMME FATALE: ON ZOE CROSER'S RECONSIDERED ARCHIVE OF MICHELLE DUBOIS

Essay for Aperture by Jan Tumlir, July 2009

Over the course of a number of years, Zoe Croser became the recipient of a pictorial archive comprising the entire output of an amateur photographer, Michelle DuBois. Seeing herself as Croser's "spiritual mother," they happen to share a faint resemblance, suggesting that there is more to this "family romance" than meets the eye, as always. Overall, the archive might be categorized as an exercise in self-portraiture, but of a pointedly fragmented, deflected sort. For the most part produced in the period immediately postwar, it is pervaded with a host of ambiguities at once psychological and geopolitical. DuBois appears against one exotic backdrop after another - in Japan, Korea, Vietnam, and so on - as a chameleon-like figure, continually changing her stripes to blend in with the scenery. The "orientalist" swath that she cuts through the postwar world is certainly idiosyncratic, and yet still closely aligned with that of her nation of origin. Restlessly shuttling from station to station, she describes as well the trajectory of a defiantly victorious America, isolationist no longer, and determined to spend its "political capital" as lavishly as possible. On both counts, the personal and political, it quickly becomes clear that this is a document of *misadventure*.

Of particular interest to an art audience - not the one these pictures were meant for; they are *intimate* in the strictest sense - is the way that the protean DuBois can be seen as a Cindy Sherman *avant la lettre*. Although she is obviously not invested in any of the philosophical rationales that we have come to associate with the Pictures Group of the eighties, this does not mean that we cannot read her project through the lens of post-structuralism. Critical theory comes with the territory that these pictures now occupy, the general context of art as well as the particular context that Croser, for her part, provides.

This point is made with early exhibition of this material, *The Cindy-Shermanesque*, but *She's The Real Thing* (2005), almost as if to get it out of the way. Here, Croser operates as a Duchampian curator, selecting only those shots that are most evidently art-like, those that appear to "anticipate" Sherman's, and to which Sherman in turn delivers a "belated"

reply. That DuBois nowhere demonstrates the requisite distance to her subject - herself - that would qualify her as a "true" feminist is precisely what makes her compelling to Crosher, and to us, now. This work is not *about* the masquerade so much as it is *of* it. Moreover, if doubts are raised through the coupling, or twinning, of these two women-with-cameras, then these cut both ways. Whose deconstruction of identity is more intentional? The question itself is absurd.

"The world is already full of objects, more or less interesting; I do not wish to add any more." One is here reminded of Douglas Huebler's conflation of the photograph and the ready-made, and that it was precisely as an engine of dematerialization that the camera was so enthusiastically seized by the post-studio crowd. For the generations that followed, however, its products would grow increasingly thick, resistant; in the hands of a Sherman, a Lawler, a Prince, the print becomes a "thingly thing," as Heidegger would say. Similarly, in subsequent shows, Crosher will begin attending more to the materiality of DuBois' photographs, though now specifically as the artifacts of an analog age. From identity politics to an examination of medium, the artist's incursions into this found collection increasingly serve to highlight the way that technology "speaks" its own message through its human operators. Accordingly, DuBois' fetishism of all things Asian comes to seem almost automatic - instamatic! The stiffly abstract formalism of her pose, the undisguised artifice of her expression, all of it is Kodak-inspired Kabuki.

On the flyer for her most recent show at the 65 Grand gallery in Chicago, Crosher has reproduced the reverse-side of a print where a smudged "note to self" lies atop corporate insignia: "Beautifully painted and powdered Geisha neck, very important part of makeup." This "peek behind the scenes" reveals a backside no less false than the front, and no less true. From the outset, we sense that something is *off*: even before DuBois takes to signing her prints in the guise of her various alter egos - Alice, Kathy, Mitchi, Alice Johnson, Michelle duBois - the original alias is already suspect. However, like the name Blanche DuBois, the character that plays a character in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, it lies tellingly. When the name Crosher is added to the mix, the riddle of identity is only compounded. Who is really in control here? Is this a tale of army-base prostitution and/or

Mata-Hari-style espionage? The answer is beside the point; it is only the question of that counts here, as framed by a medium that turns monstrous before our eyes. The artist has halted the process of its decomposition as though for one last look, while there still remains something for us to see. Just before subject and object are fused in rotten flatness, DuBois bends down to show off her cleavage. In the same way she has done countless times before, she arches her back and stares straight ahead, a play-mate and sphinx.