

Women: The Work of Iris Klein

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Iris Klein's ghostly, graceful, and beautiful images invite us into a place of mystery with a dreamlike narrative of confrontation. A woman in white standing in a room, lying provocatively on a bed, sitting at a desk – always alone, always still, perhaps waiting. We are invited, if not forced, to read the relationship between the figure and the environment, as in Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills*. And similarly, the female figure as a place holder reveals invisible forces at play. However, whereas in Sherman's series the artist's own body occupies famous, culturally iconic scenarios, Klein's settings are familiar because they are studies in the mundane, the same nondescript spaces we occupy all the time, but revealed to us (through photographic reversal and attention to contrast) as murky shadow worlds. Inhabiting these worlds is not Klein's body but a simulacrum, a featureless life-sized rag doll "peeled off" her body. Klein's work brings novel perspectives on intentionality, subjectivity, and gaze into the photographic discourse.

In these works, where resides the feminine, the individual? Is it in the doll, the act of peeling in its construction, it's posing, what we gaze, what is revealed, or what is unrevealed? Where lies the intentionality of pose found in conventional photographic portraiture, particularly when there seems to be no question in this case of the subject's using a mirror or of consciously trying to project an idealized image? If the clicking of the real or metaphoric camera signifies the social acknowledgement or recognition upon which subjectivity depends; if in other words, the subject depends upon the camera for his or her specular affirmation, then what happens when, as in the case of Klein's photographic images, the subject is a doll? The doll does not seek to have its photograph taken, to be made real by it. And yet, these images are still haunted by a sense of specular affirmation. Klein's faceless dolls have taken on the photographic face which defines our contemporary field of vision in the absence or despite of any conscious intentionality that one might attribute to the photographic subject. The image as the vector by which the gaze is invited to affirm the subject is complicated here by the collapse of the distance between the body and the projected image (pose) which defines it. The body is an empty vessel, a costume displayed for the camera.

The seemingly familiar figures in Klein's images exist in and through the photograph, which confers upon them an actuality and a coherence which they would otherwise lack. The pose is not here something deliberate and active; it is, as Kaja Silverman has argued, essentially photographic. Thus, in addition to being imitative of preexisting images of femininity, the familiar figures in Klein's "portraits" are imitative of photography itself. The pose, as Barthes has pointed out, always makes another body for oneself; Klein has taken this insight and literally made a body-double of herself. She thereby re-marks the attempt to control as far as possible the objectification of one's own self image precisely by resorting to the most extreme form of

objectification. This re-marking involves a literal re-tracing and re-positioning of her body as a photographic "doll" in relation to preexisting forms of representation. She thereby not only arrives at some understanding of her subject's specular dependency, but calls into question the authority of the images that conventionally represent the visual ideal.

The illusion here unfolds slowly; through Klein's process, the controlled murkiness of the figure troubles the indexical claim of the photograph and calibrates the narrative to gradually reveal the sham of its constituent elements, vacating the comfortable illusion of familiarity. The viewer may feel slightly uneasy about her/his initial sense of recognition, and unsettled by the dawning knowledge that the illusory form is empty, yet seemed so filled.

In all images of the series, facial features are obscured, and identity emerges only through extrapolation. In some images of the series, even racial identity falls by the wayside, as the reversed prints confuse the positive and negative spaces of the face, body, and environment. One is initially tempted to ask whether the black-and-white Klein-doll is black or white. Is Klein? But as the multi-stable illusion changes state, questions like these are tenderly revealed as projective absurdity: Why did we care? We might as well ask, like the famous optical illusion, is she a duck or a rabbit?

Her process of printing positive transparencies to produce a harsh (yet ironically gentle) black and white reversal image works as if to underscore the fact that the essentializing idealization of one kind of subject always entails the converse deidealization of another.

Klein's exposure to our/ her desire to be ideal is thus disjoined both from the self (herself) and the ex-posed cultural ideal. This exposure is not purely negative, a simple rejection, but rather it is often lovingly framed in terms of an endearing and somewhat comic failure to approximate an ideal. This is particularly evident in the "Hausschlafenserie" images. Here the subject sits in an oversized bathrobe, which is suggestively "left" half-open in a way that potentially connotes "erotic photograph" to reveal in spread-eagle position a pair of inconceivably skinny long legs that are attached to a pair of oversized house slippers. The incongruous combination of elements does not elicit out and out laughter, however; rather, the image provokes a knowing, smiling sympathy for the "self"-mis-recognition of the subject.

Indeed, many of Klein's photographs allow us to project onto and through the imperfect bodily configurations of her "models" anxieties and half-conscious desires about ourselves. The series "Excerpts from the Bedroom" seemingly depict a woman's self-abandonment which offer her, again in the tradition of the erotic photograph, as "to be taken"; but this is as much about our fantasy as "hers," for we are after all dealing with a life sized doll here; or are we? Would our act of projection be diminished if the doll were replaced with a live model? Why are we willing to recognize (and thereby affirm the title of) the "Alte Frau" as an old woman? This "recognition" speaks as much to familiar and by now iconographic representations of old women with shopping carts as to our own anxieties about age and bag ladies. Conversely, "Jenny" posed very much alone in a "natural" landscape pointedly wishes to be seen, her concern is not only to look as attractive as possible while being utterly alone, but to offer

herself at this precise moment to the camera, to the gaze which is strangely present inside the deserted "natural" landscape. Jenny's preconceived concept of "pose" reflected in the mirror of the photograph makes the two images of this series more a representation of a representation than perhaps any of the others.

How can I, the viewer, read all this, if not because Klein's figures offer themselves as place holders for our giving-ourselves-to-be-seen, which we've internalized to such a degree that we almost automatically register normative meanings when we perceive, for instance, a female morphology? And yet, Klein's images of imperfect dolls lead us to occupy a viewing position which is not simply reducible to the force of normative representations. Klein's pictures open up to us the possibility of seeing again.

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