



Next Last

By Di Jayawickrema

There was a passage in your general statement on the Galerie Duboys website that really resonated with me and I'll quote you here: A photograph can at once be a transparent representation of the thing and yet it is itself an object...[the photograph] can function like an artifact that carries its history in the physical print itself which opens up interesting and subtle questions about narrative. Can you talk more how the life of a print shifts the meaning of the object being represented in it?

This idea began very early for me. When I was still an undergraduate, there was a man who would always come to this bar with one photo album. He would continually pass this album around the bar until it had passed through so many hands that it took on a different meaning. There is something about the way things are handled that changes them. Like Camus in *The Plague*, where the narrator finds a journal—some other person's writing—and the narrative moves through several points of views, which becomes a way to understand the history of the event. I am interested in the object versus the original vision. To me, photography is two things at once—there is something that is in front of the camera and then there is the notion of the reality the camera has captured. I like to play with that reality. There are so many possible interpretations.

Speaking of the history of a print, all your photographs in the Human Form exhibition have been altered by multiple techniques. Can you tell us more about the various methods used here?

I've always been a kind of experimenter—dabbling in the dark room. I've investigated a lot of processes—some that I haven't found a way to use, yet. Some of the techniques I use are historical photo processes, sometimes, simple ones like cyanotype. Serendipity and circumstance sometimes dictate things for me. When I was living in Greece, sophisticated facilities weren't available to me so I had to make do with cheap quality paper and a simple letter-sized printer. With the "Bodies" Series in this exhibition, I used the cyanotype process with low quality negatives, which I think have a beautiful quality. Something about them seems to cross history or time and I find that really interesting. The "Anti-Portraits" Series is more of an investigation of chemistry and toning. I used longer exposures, double exposures and other techniques, and really experimented with different tones. Combined with the paper negative technique, there seems to be something about them that distances from the body. The "Cyan-Portraits" Series is made through distressing paper negatives. I used a personal recipe to try to introduce something into them that is a more like a painting or a drawing.

The tearing, blurring and aging effects in all three series are both eerie and beautiful, and they do lend the photos a historical and sometimes mythical quality. You partially answered this question but did you set out to infuse your photos with these qualities or did they evolve organically from the process?

I don't have a preconceived notion when I go into a dark room. In the beginning, it's about trying to find something that speaks to me. In Italy, I felt the layering of history—a preconscious sense of so many different people and different cultures. Even in elementary school, archeology fascinated me—the notion of buried levels of things. Italy has a rich archeological history and it really made me feel how societies come and go—and how individual people pass just as countries do.

When we were setting up this interview, I thought it was funny that you asked me whether New York is where I was going to be "this week." I am almost always in one time zone but your question gave me my first clue that you weren't. And reading your biography, I see this is true. Can you recall for us one particular moment in your travels that informed your work here? The archeological qualities of your pieces made me think particularly of Greece and I wondered if that country speaks especially through these series.

I think Italy was a very strong influence. I was 18 years old when I first came to France and then I came back four years later but I didn't really connect to French culture. I'd always associated France with art—how the early experience of living in Paris was crucial for people like Picasso, but it was a Brigitte Bardot film I saw in France that made me know I had to go to Italy, which is sort of embarrassing, but there really is something magical about Italy. There is a strange and very diverse valuing of the aesthetic there. You sense that beauty is really important to Italians.

However, in terms of a direct influence, in the cyanotype series (which we're now calling "whatever is closest is most mysterious"—a quote from David Hockney that I've always liked), Greece certainly had a technical influence but even more than that, I guess I'd say living on an island for the better part of two years had a profound impact. It was my first experience of living on an island—in addition to living in a country with a language in which I barely managed to master the simplest expressions. In the cooler months, there aren't so many tourists and there are fewer and fewer boats to connect to the mainland and when the wind starts to blow regularly at 30 or 40 mph, there is a real sense of separation and isolation and for me, the scratchy quality of these images relates to the far away feeling there.

All the photographic transmutations in Human Form are of your own body. In the exhibition press release, you mentioned "the push and pull between subject and object." As a photographer, you're used to gazing at objects through your lens. Why did you choose to become the object being observed for this series? And how does it shift the subject-object relationship for you?

There's a kind of freedom I felt when I took photographs of myself that I wouldn't have had photographing other people. In the "Anti-Portraits" Series, I was able to step out of the tradition of making portraits that are beautifying. I didn't have to be concerned about subjects' worries about how they were depicted. I grew up with a mother who was a psychologist so I was aware of subject-object issues from an early age, especially that of being a woman under the male gaze. Through the "Body" Series, especially, I could confront, in a way, what women have to. When I was still in grad school, I shot a series of female subjects and asked them to write their reactions on the white part below their photos and I got one comment "You photographed my bad side." Then, I had them photograph me and I remember one woman asked me to take a very effeminate pose, almost as a sort of revenge for photographing her. That's a version of the push and pull.

According to the release, you set out to "discover [your] body again." What have you discovered? And how did it feel to scar and transmute your own body in print?

What's nice about these techniques is that the process is theatrical—because all the scarification is unreal, you don't have to suffer, the photograph carries the violence. For me, photography is story time—I don't really have any restraint about what's real and what's not, what's moral and what's not. When I was very young, I lost two friends, one to suicide and one in an accident, which was an important part of my development as an artist. It forced me to come to grips with mortality—and the scarification is about the tension in the body itself. The body is the site of all our pleasures, how we experience the world, but this great tool is going to end up disappointing me one day. One day, it's going to give up and I won't have these great experiences anymore.

Your co-exhibitor in Human Form, Frédérique Chauveaux will be presenting several video installations. In a literal sense, a major difference between your two bodies of work is that as videos, her work is movement-based while as photographs your work is "still." How do you see your work as conversing with hers, the commonalities and the juxtapositions?

It was interesting for me to work with Frédérique, who is a dancer who moved to choreography and the visual arts, where she uses video as it allows her to explore her background in movement. I'm interested in movement too but more the idea of fixing it. To me, the photographs in this exhibit can feel like sculptures that have just been unearthed. That is an interesting contrast between the two exhibits. I think what links my work to hers—aside from the fact that there is always something emotional in dealing with the human form—in both our work, the body comes across as a kind of place. In Frédérique's work, we're witnessing some of the dynamic moments that will leave strong traces on the body—be they emotionally difficult or more tender. It is an investigation of the human body as it moves through different circumstances. My work is more introspective; it is the body interacting with itself and revealing the signs of the passage of time and its struggles.

I tend to have very symbolic dreams. 25 years ago, I had an intensely symbolic dream about a Greek festival. In certain parts of America, the Greek populations have large, colorful festivals with food and dances and their music. In my dream, I was an outsider at one of these festivals and my mother was also there. Watching the dancers go by, my mother asked me if I wanted to join them, and I said "No, no" and kept looking on at the dancers. Suddenly, a male masked dancer stopped, gazed directly at me and said, "If you don't dance, you will die." In a way, this exhibition with Frédérique is a response to that dream.

* Introductory quote by Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*

Links:

[Galerie Duboys, Human Form Exhibit, 16 March - 05 May 2012, 6, rue des Coutures St-Gervais, 75003 Paris](#)

[Read Bamboos's interview with Michael's co-exhibitor Frederique Chauveaux here](#)

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