

*From landscape
imagery to
pornography,
medical history
to fashion
photography,
Zoe Leonard*

*reinvents
photohistory.*

LIZ KOTZ
*investigates the
boundaries
between cadaver
and cover girl.*

the vivisector

With controversial exhibitions at Documenta 9 in Kassel, Germany in 1992, and at New York's Whitney Biennial last year, Zoe Leonard has quickly become one of the most visible American artists of her generation. Her photographs range from formally beautiful landscapes to activist-inflected investigations of medical-history museums, displaying a surprising heterogeneity of subject matter and styles. They also exhibit a decided ambivalence towards the legacies of the early 1980s: there is no text, no montage, often no overt politics. Yet the work, particularly as anchored by Leonard's startling Documenta installation, marks a complex intervention into postmodern photography and feminist art practice.

The 33-year-old artist, who has lived in New York most of her life but only had her first solo exhibition there in 1992, began exhibiting photographs in the late 1970s and was part of the landmark Times Square Show of 1980. A self-taught photographer initially inspired by the images of Larry Clark, Diane Arbus, and Weegee, Leonard's work exhibits an eccentric relationship to a fine-art photographic tradition. With a hip disregard for the codes of art photography, Leonard reinvents photo history for herself. Her images are disarmingly casual, yet also full of pathos, sentiment, and nostalgia. This sensibility could only emerge in a broader visual art context: there's something in her work very alien to the proliferating, promiscuous quality associated with much photography. Leonard is generally characterized as an artist who works with photography rather than a "photographer". She produces relatively few images, and exerts enormous control over the presentation of her work. Her approach is rigorously installation-oriented, and some of her strongest projects – for Documenta and in Ghent – have been site-specific, as much about the location, the object, and the experience as the image.

Much of Leonard's reputation was made in Europe, in powerful exhibitions and installations in Cologne and Belgium, so it's perhaps fitting that it was her *succès de scandale* in Documenta that brought her into prominence.

In a gutsy installation, Leonard placed black-and-white shots of women's genitals alongside the somewhat schlocky Rococo paintings hanging in the Neue Galerie. The effect, documented in installation photographs, is startling, as the simple, direct images completely unsettle the staid surroundings. The project can be seen as a logical, and extre-

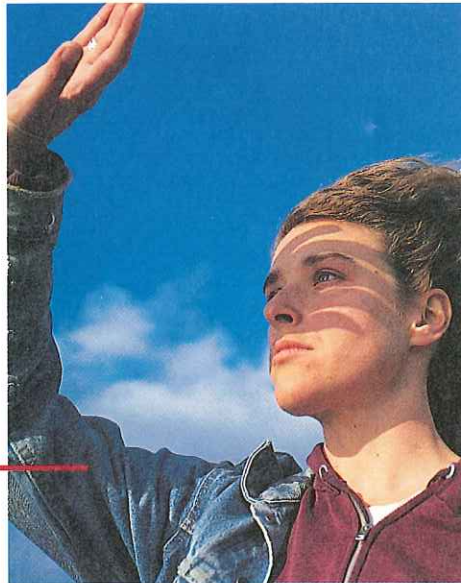
mely funny, reading of both Douglas Crimp's 1980 essay "On the Museum's Ruins" and the photography of Louise Lawler. For it is an intervention that places desire – female desire – lesbian desire – within the museum, within art history, in a manner that is both seductive and aggressive.

In an interview last year in the *Journal of Contemporary Art*, Leonard discussed her initial plans for a more complicated installation at Documenta, featuring numerous images, before paring the project down to its core.

"About six days before I went to Germany to install, I realized that all these complex impulses were contained in one image: a woman's sex." Quickly assembling six friends to pose for her, she shot the series of curiously flat, unerotic photographs, loosely resembling Courbet's *The Origin of the World*. Leonard placed them alongside the period portraits of women, removing landscape paintings and paintings that primarily featured men.

Hanging on the damask-covered walls of the vaguely ostentatious regional museum, the photographs bring out surprising resonances in the otherwise unremarkable historical paintings. One female portrait appears to glance, slightly aghast, at an image of a woman masturbating. Another painting, of two women together, takes on an erotic cast. The photographic intervention entirely transforms the art on display, by perversely short-circuiting the elaborate structures of desire and display in which the woman's sex is the desired but concealed object of voyeurism – "cutting to the chase," as Leonard remarks. Blank, almost taxidermic images whose aesthetic is closer to surveillance photography than hard-core pornography, the photographs stand in for much that is absent or unstated: the sexuality of the women in the paintings, the paucity of women artists in Documenta, the pleasure of the female viewer.

In a subsequent exhibition at the Renaissance Society in Chicago, seven small genital images from Documenta were hung horizontally, the serial presentation bringing out their specimen-like quality and a resonance with Leonard's other works, particularly the morbid nature photographs and medical-history models. A strange graphic confluence circulated among many of the images in the show: the gutted



left:
Seated
Anatomical
Model,
1991-2, gelatin
silver print,
17.8" x 12"

interiors of the anatomical models; the almost empty arena of *Bullfight #1* (1986-90); the semicircular topography of *Niagara Falls #1 & #2* (1986-90). This series of gaping holes was anchored, ultimately, by the Documenta photographs of women's genitals. Re-sited in Chicago, the "beaver shots" clearly represent the core image of Leonard's project to date, condensing recurrent concerns with the representation of the female body, the photographic "capture" of the image, and the fascination with death and decay.

What emerges in the wake of the Renaissance Society exhibition is a strong sense of the conceptual and psychic continuity underpinning otherwise disparate images and projects. A nexus of sexuality, death, and the inorganic circulates most overtly in relation to the images of capture: the bullfight, a taxonomic photograph of insects pinned to a board, and a decidedly creepy image of a lynx with a rat in its mouth. While in one sense natural or journalistic images, they read metaphorically as scenes of highly charged psychic obsessions. They also echo the ambivalent nature of Leonard's presentation, in which meticulously crafted prints are tacked to the wall, their corners tattered by pinpricks.

In its premeditated, sophisticated use of seemingly offhand gestures, Leonard's work turns on a number of paradoxes. It draws on the look of more instrumental uses of photography – journalism, reconnaissance photography, scientific and medical documents, snapshots – yet pushes this industrial aesthetic, and its more documentary content, towards subjective, deeply personal ends. Printed full frame, unframed, and unretouched, Leonard's beautiful, grainy black-and-white prints are formally elegant, and often deeply



poetic. Carefully sidestepping the aesthetic perfectionism of fine art photography, her nuanced and technically disciplined work is presented with a contrived casualness – a clear step away from the kinds of heavy artifice and intense self-

referentiality dominant in the gallery world of the 1980s, to be sure, but one that risks its own kind of preciousness. Yet when Leonard's work hits, as it so often does, the effect is enigmatic and startling, a kind of throwaway "third meaning" carried not by the images themselves but by the look and graininess of the print, and by the disarming sense

of informality. A simple shot out an airplane window at puffy white clouds – something we've looked at countless times – is unaccountably moving, even sublime. Reintroducing a host of unacceptable subjects into high-art photography, what unites Leonard's production is what it must defy in so doing.

This undeniably Romantic aesthetic has led some to read Leonard's work as a repression of the photographic activity of



postmodernism. Leonard clearly distances herself from the overt representational politics of Sherrie Levine or Barbara Kruger, and her willed ignorance of other artists' work (whether Courbet or Vija Celmins, whose drawings of waves some of Leonard's photographs stunningly resemble) suggests not only a partial disavowal of art history but of the very workings of image culture: as Douglas Crimp put it, "Behind every picture there is always another picture." At times it appears as if the artist were re-experiencing a sense of immanence and immediacy, as if all these images had not been seen before, as if these very gestures of authenticity were not themselves intensely mannered and nostalgic.

Yet her work represents a crucial opening-up of photographic issues and subjects, and a necessary departure from the modes of "institutional critique" that, allied with highly codified forms of feminism, verged on academicism by the late 1980s. As Leonard explains, "I don't think of my work as anti-formalist. I'm not really interested in challenging other artists, other art forms, proving them wrong. I make the work I make because it's how I think. These are the things that move me. This is my kind of beauty... The roughness of my prints is my way of letting the viewer into my process, the process of photography."

Leonard first received widespread attention for a striking series from the mid-to-late 1980s of aerial shots of cities

top left:
View From Below,
Geoffrey Beene
Fashion Show,
1990, gelatin
silver print,
image 20.8" x 31"

bottom left:
Niagara Falls #1,
1986-90,
gelatin silver
print, image
24.75" x 37.25"

and landscapes combined with photographs of maps and topographical models. The characteristically grainy and scratched black-and-white prints investigated human structures with a curious sense of abstraction. The aerial views initially look like surveillance photographs, and early critical response read them as a quasi-documentary analysis of obsessive social organization.

Yet Leonard's aesthetic formalism and almost eerie sense of detachment in the landscapes are radically antididactic. While grounded in a personal fascination with architecture, topography and travel, ultimately the images are more about pattern and surface than site. Instead of recording information, they evoke an emotional experience of detached fascination and remove, a sense of drift and isolation.

Paradoxically, Leonard's work is often most powerful when it achieves a sense of muteness, as in the diptych *Water* (1988-90). Shot extremely flat, the ocean's surface of contours and lines are mesmerizingly abstract and yet full of associations; they look like nothing so much as skin magnified. But it is the opacity of the image, vacant and unfathomable, that intrigues and invites concentration. This kind of emptying out takes over entirely in Leonard's images of clouds shot from airplanes, which ended the landscape series. The clouds, mediated by the outline of a curved window, the shadow of the wing, or the streaked, reflected glass, suggest a troubled interiority. Repetitive and obsessive, their moodiness suggests a darker emotional subtext to the landscapes: they underscore the sense of perpetual dislocation, of hovering above human affairs without actually being a part of them, that pervades the aerial images.

Leonard's long-term involvement with documenting existing sites, whether aerial landscapes or museum interiors, has developed alongside an acute sensitivity to the siting of her own work and the power of installation to shift the meaning and resonance of photographic images. Increasingly, this concern with systems of collection and display has led her to explore "models" of all types – from maps and architectural mockups to anatomical

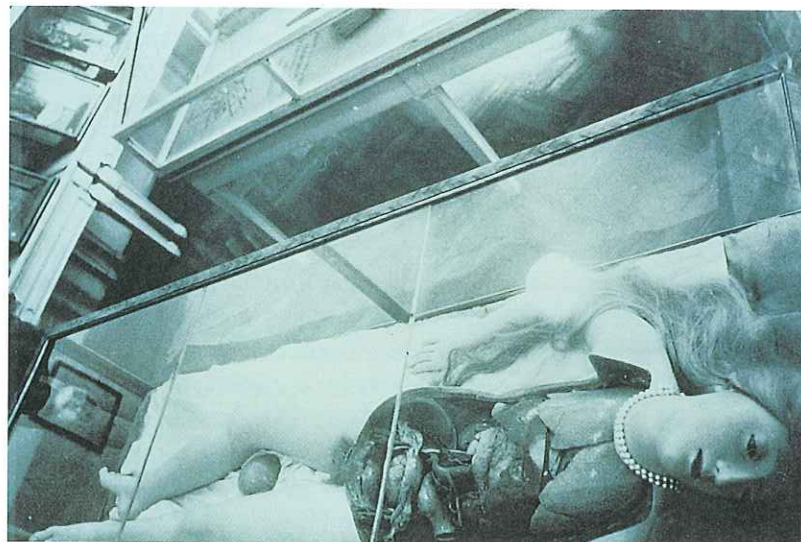


top right:
Anatomical Model of Woman's Head Crying, 1993, gelatin silver print, 16.8" x 11.8"

bottom right:
Wax Anatomical Model Shot Crooked from Above, 1990, gelatin silver print, 26.5" x 39"

figures and catwalk models. Shifting to human subjects, in 1990 Leonard photographed fashion models parading down a catwalk, awkwardly backlit and shot from below. Catching glances between two models, and looking up the skirt of another, the oddly framed images suggest something of the private dramas and perverse relations underneath such public displays of wealth and status. At an exhibition at the University Art Museum in Berkeley, Leonard juxtaposed the fashion images with photographs of a bullfight, a gigantic gilt mirror, and a man in drag, to set up another chain of associations around questions of performance, decorum and entrapment.

Critics have remarked on the fashion models as figures of female desire and identification. Yet to read them as the site of a "lesbian gaze" in Leonard's work partially disavows the creepiness of the images, the morbidity of the almost anorexic bodies of the models. In *Frontal View*, *Geoffrey Beene Fashion show* (1990), the model's raised skirt reveals not the female sex but the strangely shaped cotton crotch of her pantyhose; her figure resembles that of dress-up dolls whose hairless, genital-less bodies emulate an ideal femininity eviscerated of grotesque, animal-like sexuality. Encircled by the bell-shaped, vaguely biomorphic skirt, the model's absent sex troubles the frame; we're looking up her skirt less out of voyeurism than to make sure she's really alive. Shot from below from four different angles, the spooky figures look like ghosts or corpses – a deathly imagery aligning them with the nature images and photographs taken in medical-history museums.



The work has an unsettling ambivalence, as Leonard implicates herself, her own desires and anxieties, in these uneasy spectacles. This morbid fascination erupts in a series of images of 18th-century anatomical models from a medical-history museum in Venice, Italy. In one particularly arresting image, *Wax Anatomical Model with Pretty Face* (1990), a wax female figure, opened from chest to abdomen, rests languidly with a string of pearls around her neck and long, flowing



blond hair. There are several views of the dummy in her case, each probing her queasy status as biological specimen and erotic object.

Leonard recounts first seeing an image of the figure in a guidebook to Vienna: "She struck a chord in me. I couldn't stop thinking about her. She seemed to contain all that I wanted to say at the moment, about feeling gutted, displayed. Caught as an object of desire and horror at the same time." A subsequent image, *Seated Anatomical Model* (1991-1992), presents another gutted medical model with her arm raised in a gesture of fear, as if warding off attack.

While the museum images may be exploring well-trod conceptual terrain, they have a perverse emotional force, anchored by a masochistic identification with the gutted or dismembered female body. Here Leonard draws on a photographic legacy that is half Diane Arbus, half surrealism. Yet unlike the freak show grotesquerie of photographers like Joel-Peter Witkin, Leonard is clearly as interested in the psychic and historical systems that would put these models on display as she is in the models themselves. In *Preserved Head*

of a Bearded Woman, Musée Orfilia (1991), Leonard presents five views of a woman's head, preserved in a glass canister, which she shot at a Paris museum. Yet what keeps these prints, however appalling, from a strident moralism, is their formal beauty and the intense fascination they evidence for the macabre relics of European culture.

While much has been made of Leonard's involvement in ACT UP and other activist collectives, to read her photography as an extension of a more overtly political project seems misguided. To do so flattens the work into a form of critique that denies the intense involvement with these morbid scenarios.

Obsessively returning to certain spectacles, to certain images, to look and look again, Leonard's photographs suggest that the pleasure this kind of attention provides is not separable from horror, anxiety, or fear. There is a love of the museum here, and of quasi-archaic systems of observation and display, that belies a position of straightforward critique. As Leonard states: "I like to embark on my own little projects of observation, extrapolating on them and coming up with hypotheses. In some ways, I think I do my own science." For while promoting a visceral, masochistic identification with the victim, Leonard's images also take up the position of the surveyor

who fixes these spectacles in her gaze. This extreme voyeurism is coded into the images themselves, through the awkward angles and the sometimes grainy, underlit quality, to suggest complicity and the surreptitious looking at forbidden objects: we really do desire that these things be analyzed.

Historically, photography was seen as the repression of death, diabolically returning absent subjects to vision, to presence. In Leonard's work, the opposite seems true: there's a melancholic attachment to the moment of privation, absence, and death. Everything keeps moving away, and photography must capture this loss time and time again. The photograph can't be just an image; it must function as an allegorical as well as indexical referent to all the work, as if all impulses, all desires, must be contained in this one image: of clouds, a model's pantyhosed crotch, Niagara Falls, of any number of arbitrary and apparently banal subjects.

It's like taking a second to sneak a glance at death, at the abyss, at an incredible loneliness that can only be spoken of indirectly: this great act of mourning that each picture performs.

left:
Untitled installation
at Neue Galerie,
Documenta 9,
Kassel, Germany,
June-Sept. 1992