

ONCE IN LOVE WITH AMY  
(DETAIL), 1997,  
CIBACHROME, 30.5 x 22  
INCHES. COURTESY CASEY  
KAPLAN, NEW YORK.

IN AN IMAGE from *Once in Love With Amy* (1997), a recent project by the Los Angeles-based artist Amy Adler, a young woman stands before the viewer, half-clothed, either in the act of dressing or undressing. Without knowing her exact age or circumstances, we can tell she's young by a certain unsculpted quality of her body. Yet looking up, she confronts us as we stand looking, standing in, as it were, for whoever took these images. She's subject to someone else's gaze, someone else's composition, but there's a look of provocation on her face that could be solicitation or anger or dare.

The seductive, unsettling quality of the

AMY ADLER

## SURROGATES

Liz Kotz

My work is so much about desire and its triangular nature. Desire is always mediated through someone else's desire.

Sherrie Levine

image is intensified by our awareness that the drawn body has been inserted into a photographic background—creating a confusion not alleviated by reading, in the press release, that the work is based on an image of the artist at the age of nineteen, taken by a older woman. As part of a series of works produced over the past four years, Adler's insistent portrayal of young bodies queries the desires, especially adult desires, circulating in and around these figures—not the least, her own.

Adler's province is the photographic image, and the peculiar substitutions and displacements that take place there. These she

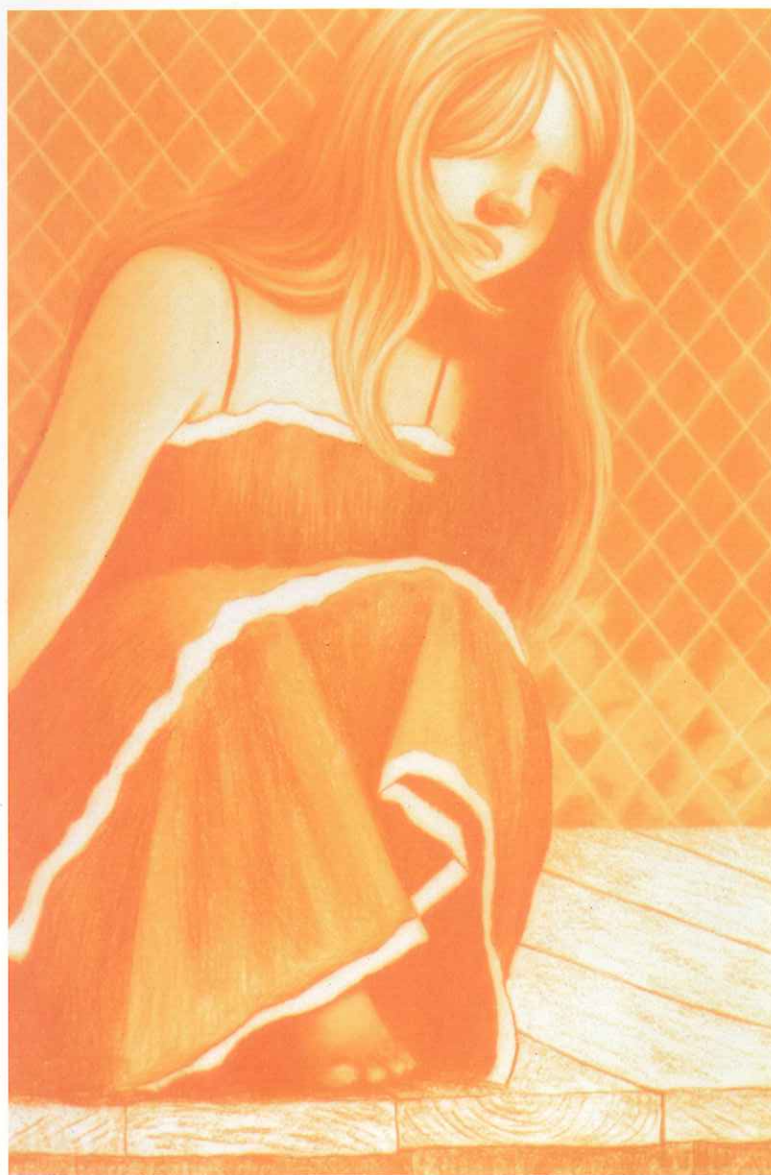
probes via a curious melding of drawing and re-photography. Some of the imagery is highly charged—particularly that of *Once in Love with Amy*, which includes a series of five images of a young blond woman spread-eagled, nude, on an ornate table. Yet other images—most, really—are apparently banal, like the five pictures of a pre-teen girl awkwardly posing for the camera in *What Happened to Amy?* (1996) or the series of boys seemingly at play in *The Problem Child* (1995). Yet the titles suggest disturbance, as does the intense stillness of the figures, who appear uncomfortably caught in their frames. Unsettling certain boundaries—between normalcy and trouble, the everyday and the extreme, innocence and violation—is clearly what’s at stake here. Unfortunately, it’s been all too tempting for critics to turn to written materials—press releases and the like—to tell us the “story” behind the work, paradoxically bypassing the images in order to explain them. Yet the images themselves possess a palpable tension, a sense of implied narrative, that is more important than knowledge of whatever actual events may have preceded their production.

Adler starts with a drawing, made from a photographic image, which she then photographs. In a curious substitution, the finished work exists as a photograph, and the drawing is destroyed. In some pieces, the drawing is re-situated with elements of the original (source) photograph through digital manipulation. So total is the melding of media that at first you can’t quite figure out what you are looking at: in the age of the computer, it is now possible to “draw” with photography, to composite the image, just as with the traditional media of painting or drawing. In addition, Adler adamantly refuses the serial logic of photography, repressing its inherent reproducibility by making only unique prints, not editions. Thus the works insist on being read as records of a process, one with strange shifts and reversals, where one image replaces another.

This process, however convoluted it may

initially seem, is somehow integral to Adler’s project, to its careful retracing of the desires circulating in the image and its aggressive cancellation of prior stages. And the process is indeed laborious: the image must be carefully rendered, a lengthy transcription by hand via pastels or charcoal. The hand at stake here, however, is not a marker for fluidity, virtuosity, or gesture. Instead, it serves as the concrete bodily mechanism by which the artist visibly, viscerally, works. Adler’s drawing style is tight,

*WHAT HAPPENED TO AMY?*,  
1996, C-PRINT, 20 x 16  
INCHES. COURTESY CASEY  
KAPLAN, NEW YORK.





compacted, and painstakingly modeled, sometimes reminiscent of a teenage girl's drawings of pop stars, or the scenarios of Pierre Klossowski. These comparisons locate her work in the intra-psychic territory of fantasy, and the kinds of visual representations that serve as its props. The cramped, careful renderings and meticulous shadings press the artist's subjectivity into view.

Adler's current production emerged in 1994 around a key piece, *After Sherrie Levine*, a photographed drawing of a young boy's blank and nubile torso. The image, slightly re-cropped, reproduces Sherrie Levine's *After Edward Weston* (1981) copy of Weston's nude studies of his son, Neil. Through her celebrated appropriation, Levine created a fascinatingly ambivalent reading of the canonical image, making visible its undeniably sexual, even incestuous content. An image taken by a woman of an image taken by a man of his son,

TEAM (DETAIL), 1994, B&W PHOTO, 20 x 24 INCHES. COURTESY CASEY KAPLAN, NEW YORK.



it speaks of childhood sexuality and the eroticism of the young body. As Adler has learned from Levine, the act of remaking the image makes it "her image," and explicitly implicates her within this circulation of desire and cultural myths, and within the phantasmagoria of the image.

At the same time as *After Sherrie Levine*, Adler made two series of images of young men: the moody, evasive black-and-white pictures of baseball players in *Team*, and the blond teen fanzine idols in *Gold*. For the young female artist, the male figure and face clearly offered an important surrogate, a substitute through which to probe all the places where desire, identification, aggression, and fantasy converge in a slippery, emotionally charged morass. Perhaps we don't need to know, as viewers, that the female figures in *What Happened to Amy?* and *Once in Love with Amy* are both based on images taken of Adler at a younger age. The intense subjective engagement evident in the images suggests that all the figures are "Amy," whether based on pictures of boys, girls, or celebrities like Jodie Foster and Brooke Shields. Yet Adler's decision to use images of herself, taken by others, and in such vulnerable states, is nonetheless crucial; it somehow separates her project definitively from certain work of the eighties that she nonetheless draws on. And in a present-day art world glutted with endless variations on the staged photograph, the mock document, and the like, Adler's hybrids have a rare emotional hold. They force us to examine why at this moment, the re-taking of the image, and of the body, seems to be taking place through drawing.

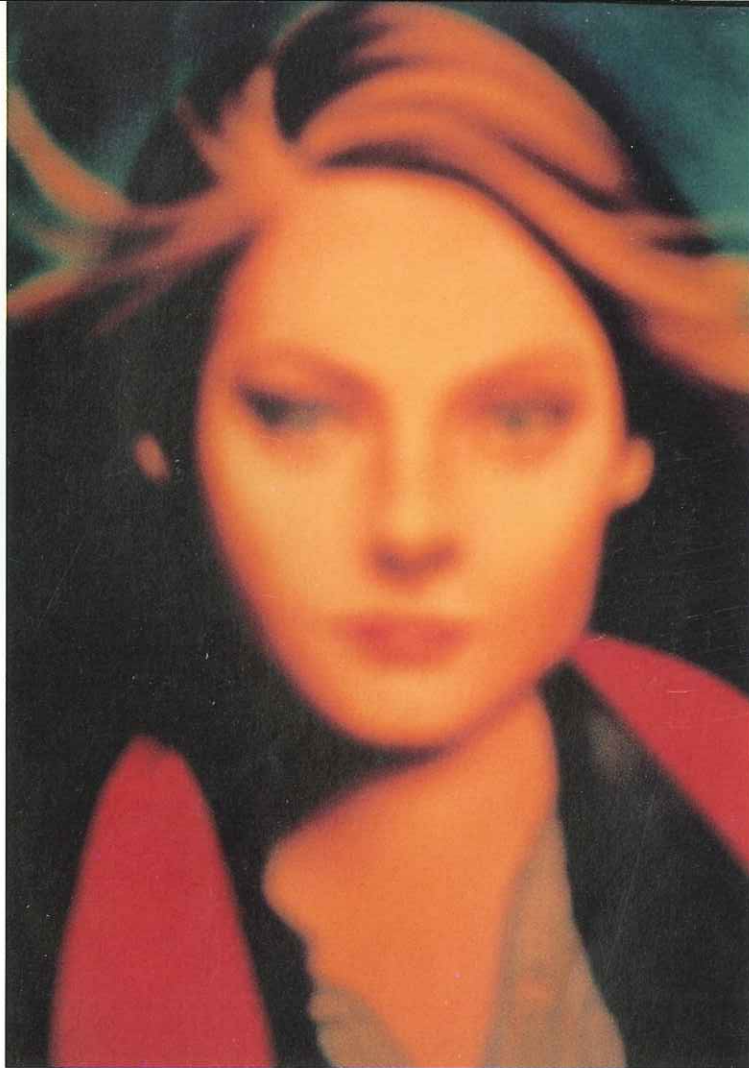
Re-photography, as we know from Sherrie Levine and Richard Prince, is always a means of reprocessing the image, and re-authoring it. By taking up drawing, however, Adler not only insists on the "copied" status of her images but shifts this re-authoring to another register, one which emphasizes the bodily transaction, emotional weight and ambivalence of her relation to the image, as

much subjugation as mastery. The artist states, "I was always aware of this *servitude* involved in drawing, there's always this power involved, with the figure, my *executing* it. I hire myself to do those drawings, it's labor."

Levine once characterized her re-photographed works as setting up an almost imperceptible oscillation between original and copy, where the invisible image "haunts" the other. The manual procedure of drawing, however, wrenches a deeper divide between final work and source material. In Adler's work, the intervention of the hand opens up a space for explicit re-narration, while nonetheless insisting on strict constraints. It fictionalizes a whole situation, reworks it as a fantasy while still holding it tightly to the structure of the original. It also allows Adler to restage the dynamic between subject and photographer, to occupy both positions, and explore their inseparability.

Of course, this fraught relationship may be most overtly evident in the two series of images of "Amy." Since they both portray a youthful female subject—barely pre-teen in one, barely post-teen in the other—the question of who is taking these images, and why, immediately confronts us. Yet the investment of desire in the more "banal" images, the baseball players or teen idols, disrupts a certain narrative of exploitation or clear-cut violation. Anonymous head shots in a catalogue don't entail the same dynamics as private Polaroids. Why, then, are they all subjected to the same, seemingly grueling procedure?

This question, I think, forces us to confront the perverse aggressivity of Adler's images. For while the drawings recreate the original image, they also drop a veil between it and ourselves. Simultaneously changing the image and keeping it the same, the final work both cancels out and preserves the ambivalences of the prior stages—but at a now inaccessible remove. Thus the drawings, products of a time-intensive process, have to be destroyed: the instantaneous moment of the photograph preserves a record of them, but precisely as part of an irre-



trievable past. The peculiar poignancy of the final works rests in part on the real loss augured by that destruction, and the self-denial in the insistence on unique prints.

This uniqueness and inaccessibility are most crucial in those scenes which present the artist in moments of intense exposure, as in *Once in Love With Amy*. Beyond the content, the implicit structure of the work provokes: it's like a performance happening in front of you where you're seeing it, but you can't have it because it's not even there anymore. While the images function as surrogates for Adler's vulnerability, this distance endows her with total control.

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FOX, 1995, C-PRINT, 20 x 30 INCHES. COURTESY CASEY KAPLAN, NEW YORK.