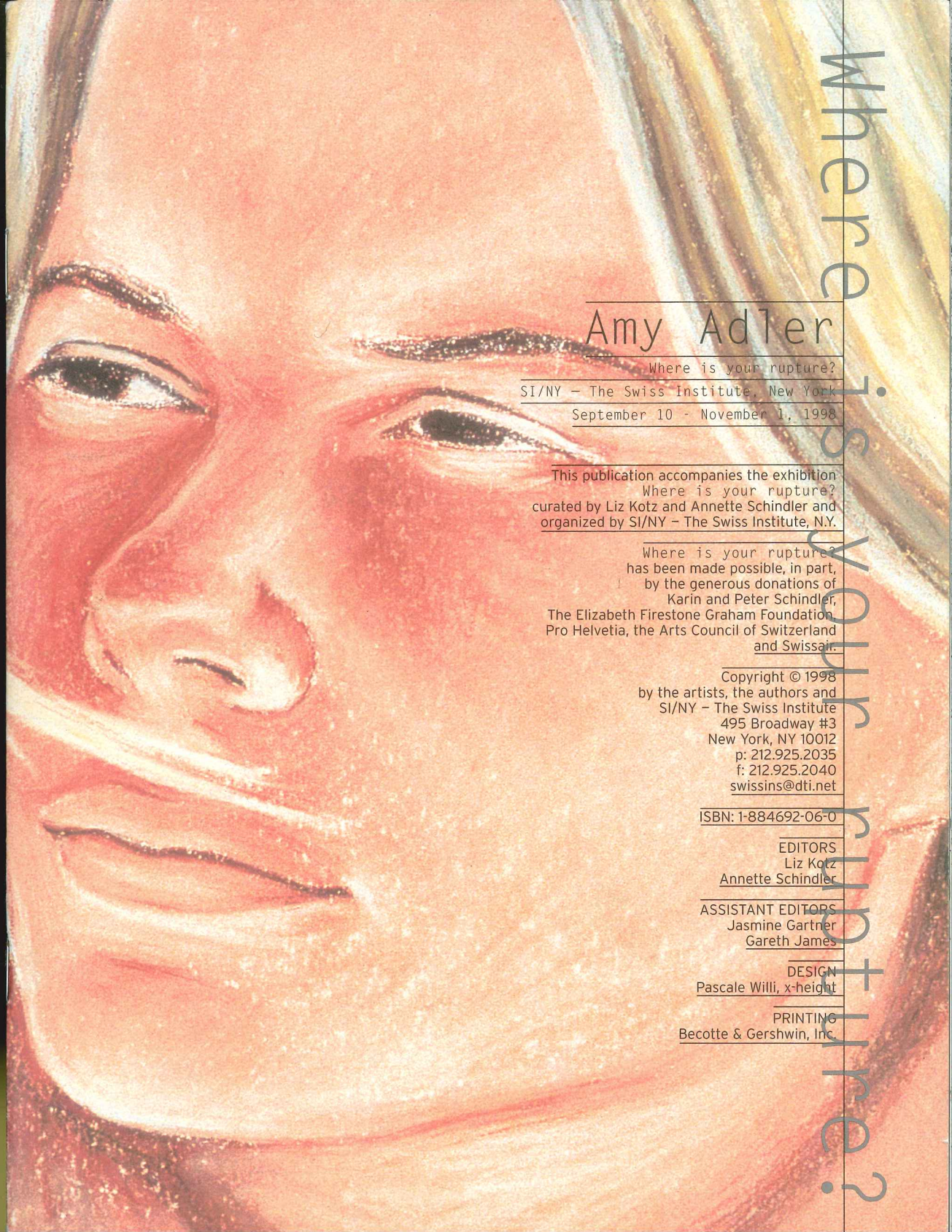

Amy Adler

Where is your rupture?

SI/NY – The Swiss Institute, New York

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Where is your rupture?

Amy Adler: Transfer into Otherness

by Liz Kotz

"Every day the urge grows stronger to get a hold of an object at very close range by way of its likeness, its reproduction." – **Walter Benjamin**

"The world itself has taken on a photographic face: it can be photographed because it strives to be absorbed into the spatial continuity which yields to snapshots." – **Siegfried Kracauer**

While still in graduate school, Amy Adler began working on an ongoing project collecting images. She clipped photos of figures, mostly actors/celebrities, with whose lives or images she felt a resonance: Jodie Foster, River Phoenix, Mariel Hemingway, Leonardo diCaprio. She later used some of the found images as source material for her works, which consistently take the form of strange hybrids of drawing and photography, with varying degrees of photographic and, at times, digital manipulation.

What is the status of these images in her work? How are they to be read? And what relation do they have (if any) to Adler's admittedly peculiar, even convoluted, process of making her work? We first notice that these images take their place alongside two other main registers of images that appear in her work: anonymous images – such as those of *Team* (1994) or *The Problem Child* (1995) – and images of the artist herself, which may or may not be considered "self-portraits." The uncertainty over whether the works which portray the artist – such as *Surfing* (1997) – should be considered self-portraits is bound up with the problem of how these images of public figures function in her work.

First off, who appears in these images? Since their source materials were film stills, it is not clear whether they depict the actor or the character. They depict the actor playing a character – already something of a slippery position in terms, say, of the assumptions structuring the portrait genre, which presumes a strict and exclusive "fit" between figurative likeness, individual identity and personal history. Since its historical beginnings in the 19th century, photography was among the technologies which helped institute and regulate this "fit," as the intertwined histories of the police mug shot and the photographic portrait attest.[1] Yet much as photography, in its supposed documentary nature, is expected to help regulate this economy (one face = one person = one history) it also seems to screw it up. As the quote from Walter Benjamin cited above suggests, photography has a paradoxical tendency to put the viewing subject into a strange proximity and distance to what it depicts, in a way which can promote an instability, and potential reversibility, in positions of perceiving subject and perceived object.

This instability is part of what theorist Celia Lurie terms the "subject effects" of photography, of *seeing photographically*. By its inherent capacity to fix, freeze and frame its objects, photography tends not only to detach them from context but to disrupt or collapse the distance between cause and effect, subject and object, signifier and referent.[2] All this may seem familiar enough, yet despite our intense familiarity with seeing photographically, it is still not clear that we fully understand the enormous effects this has on subjectivity, on the very construction of subjects – and the ways these effects invade and inform domains that far exceed that of photography proper.

One of Lurie's key insights is how photographs act as something akin to perceptual prostheses, propelling the subject beyond prior boundaries of the self. More traditional forms of self-understanding, such as psychoanalysis and philosophical self-reflection – "I think, therefore I am" – work primarily via the subject-effects of narrative: subjects become accustomed to telling stories that simultaneously describe and produce their own senses of self. As increasingly complex forms of technology – photography, cinema, computers, etc. – become available, these function prosthetically, to prop up and expand our sense of personal experience and capacity. This "artificial extension of capability," Lurie argues, promotes a kind of "transfer into otherness," in which the boundaries between the self and

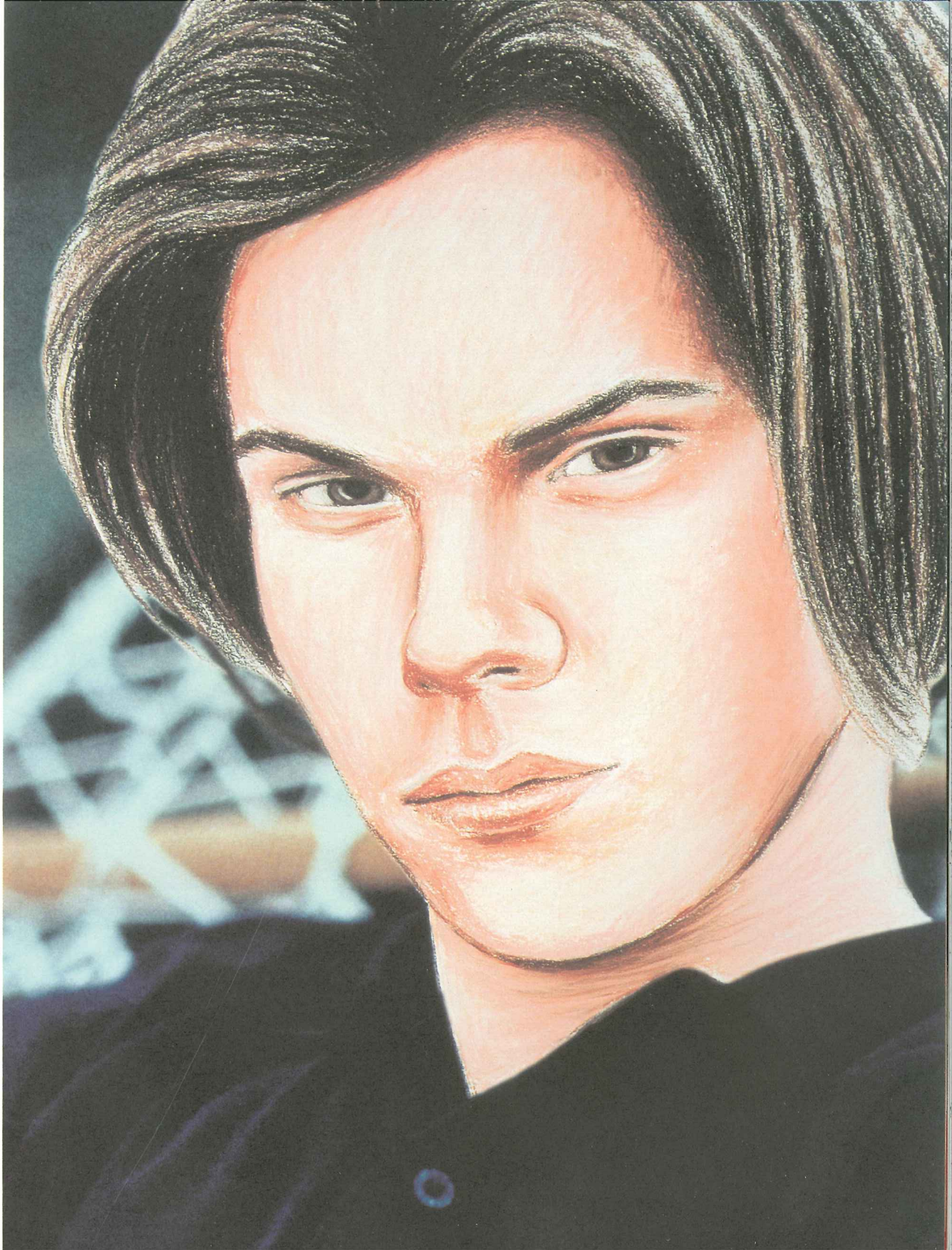
external objects and experiences are perpetually blurred and redrawn. As images, stories and technologies proliferate in advanced industrial culture, our own self-constructions increasingly take on aspects of what Lurie terms "prosthetic biographies," propelling an ongoing process of experimentation in which individuality is strategically disassembled and reassembled.[3]

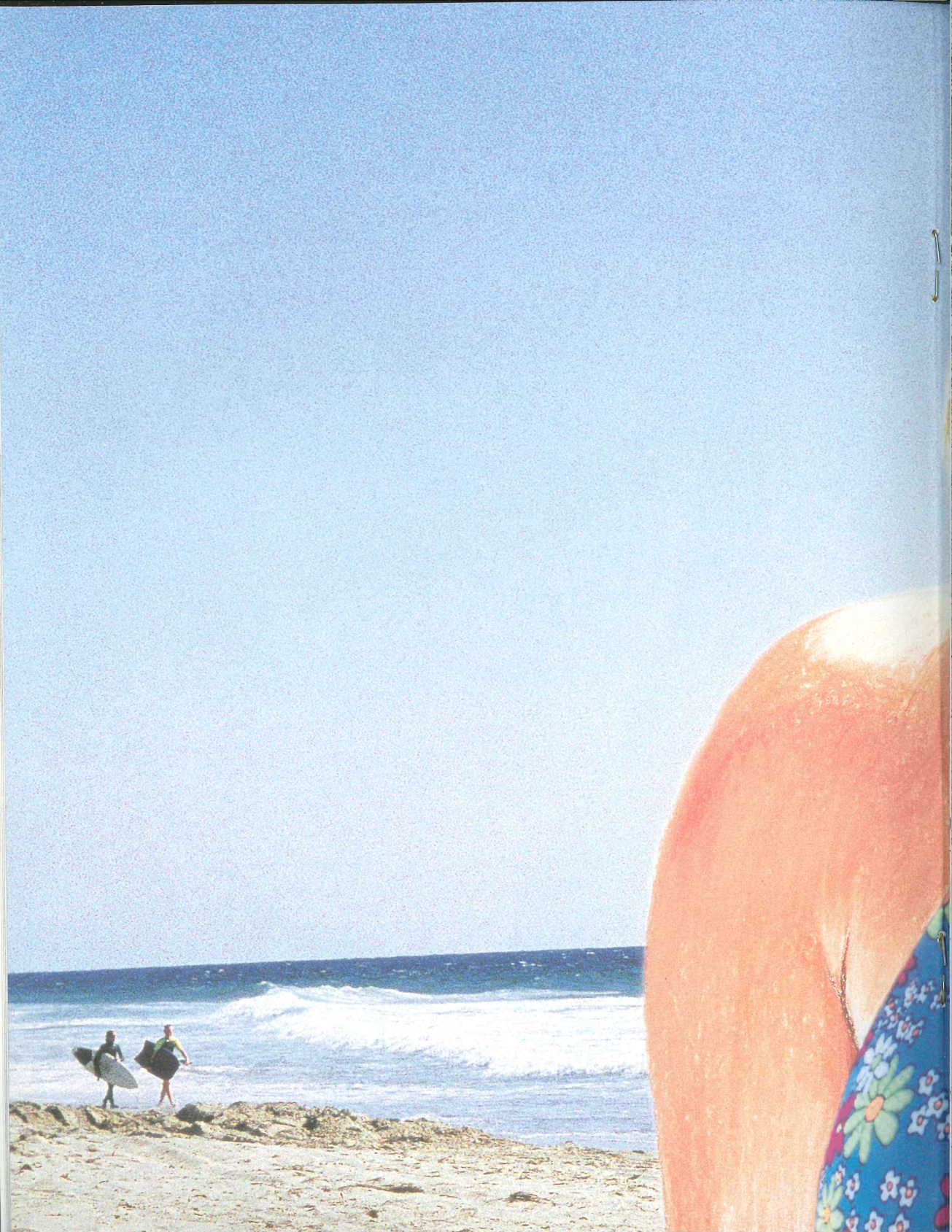
In the past twenty years, a whole range of art practices have emerged which use photography to explore this imbrication of image, identity and technologies of mechanical reproduction. To the extent that selfhood is formed in an intimate relation with the image, the capacities of photographic technologies to continually fragment, reassemble and rearrange the visual image clearly function as both analogue and model for contemporary processes of subject formation. From the careful manipulation of photographic codes to simulate film stills in Cindy Sherman's work, to the more technically seamless computer manipulation in the work of Inez van Lamsweerde, the capacities of digital manipulation increase and accelerate these processes. What is striking in Adler's work, of course, is the return to the very old medium of drawing, which she combines with more conventional photographic (and frequently digital) processes of reproduction. Why does Adler use drawing to intervene into the reproduction of the found and reprocessed image? And why does the drawing have to disappear, to end up in an end product, which takes the form of a photographic print?

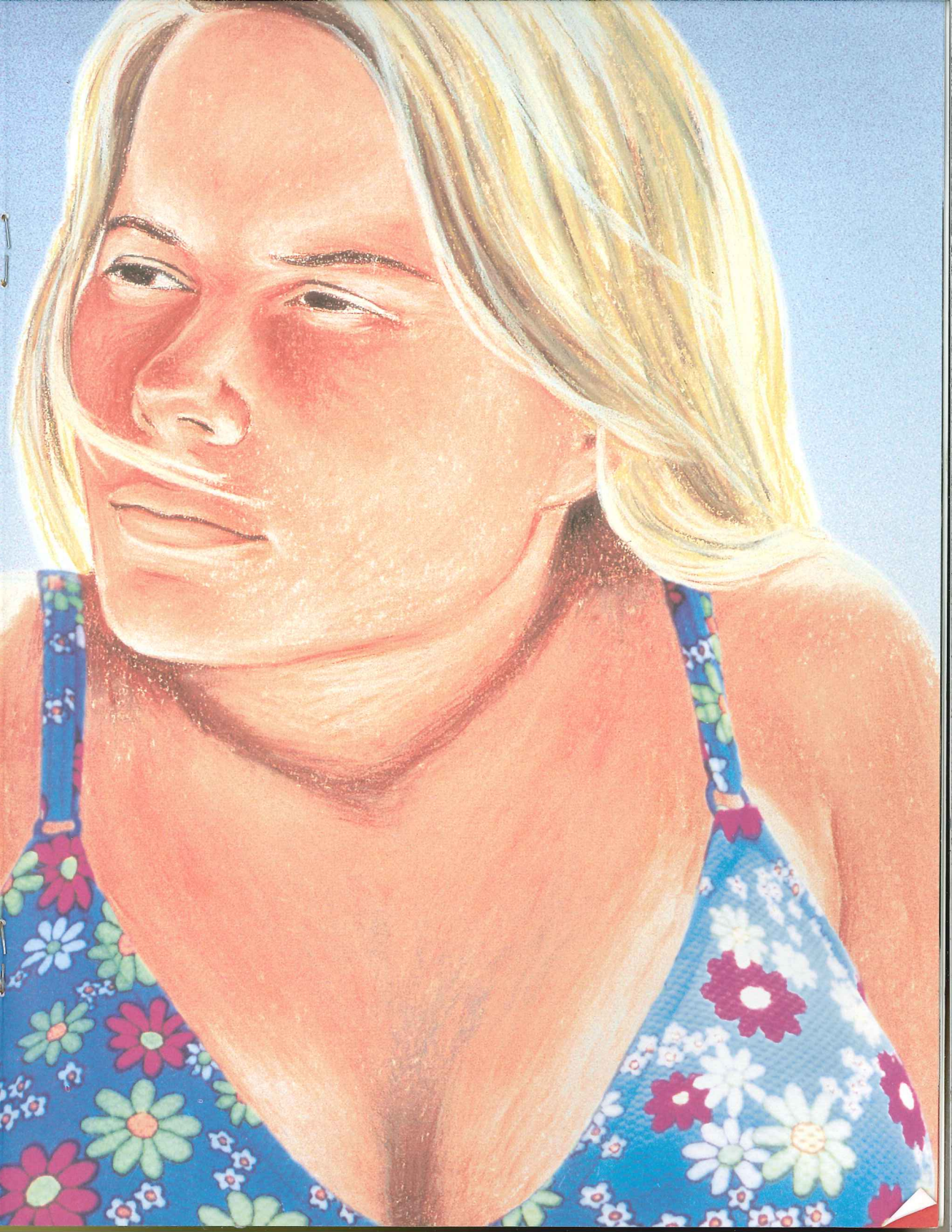
Perhaps the consequences of these choices become clearer in looking at those works in which Adler has used computer manipulation to "join" drawn and photographic materials together into an amalgam image, as in *Raising Your Gifted Child* and *Surfing* (both 1997). The image "joins" in *Raising Your Gifted Child* are jarringly anti-illusionist: mixing color and black and white, and see-sawing in and out of focus and perspective, the different pictorial elements refuse to cohere onto a shared spatial plane. Rather than melding into a quasi-seamless whole, the composited image rents apart violently, awkwardly. Not a "successful" or pleasing image, it is somehow monstrous. Do we simply attribute this to Adler's inexperience (this was one of her first computer composited images) or the limitations of technology? Do we note that this is not only one of her only group scenes, but, perhaps tellingly, one which depicts a family? And where would we locate Adler's subjectivity in this image which so dramatically "fails" to hold together?

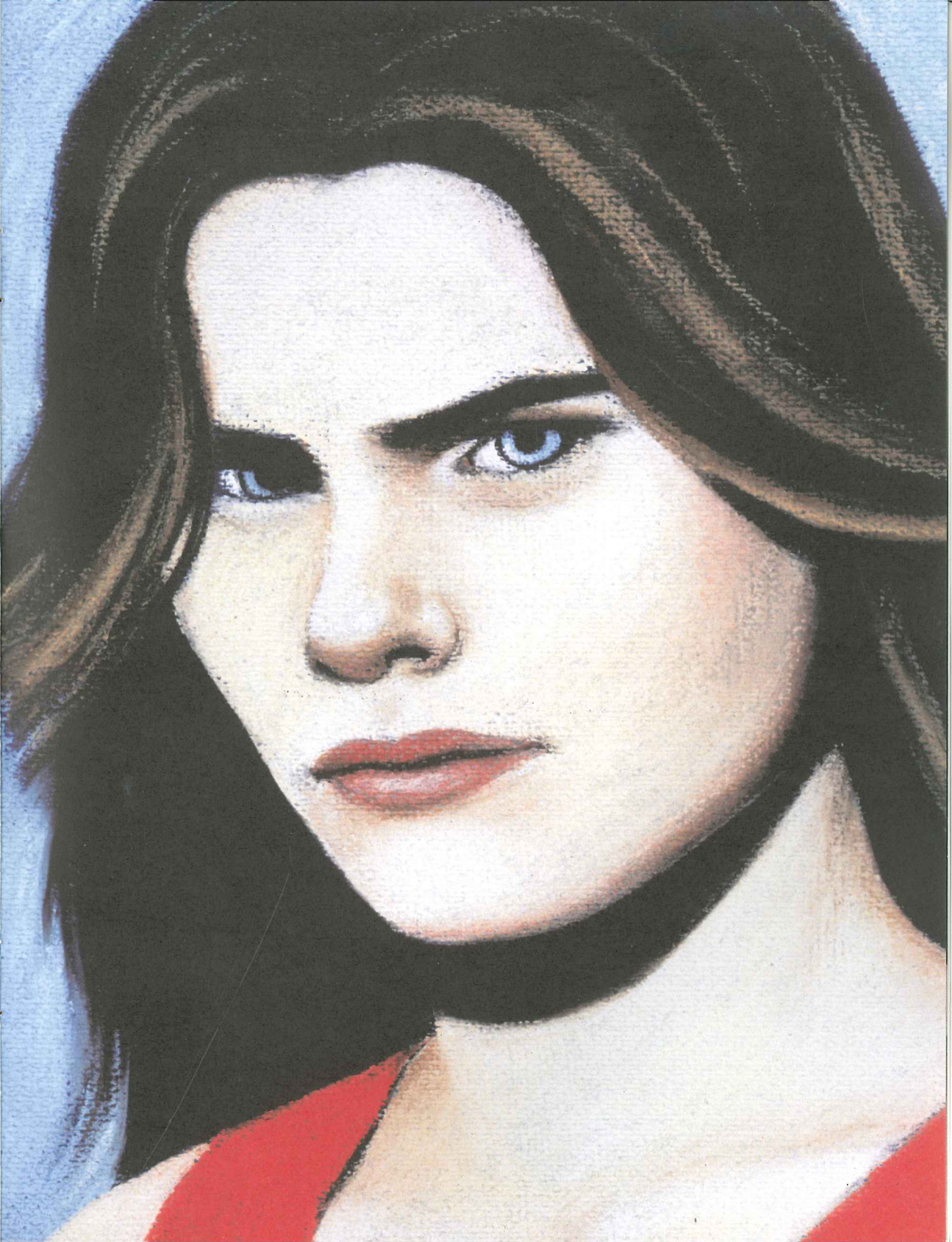
In *Surfing*, a subsequent work, the pictorial "joins" are managed somewhat more evenly: only after a double-take, perhaps, do we notice that only the figure is drawn, and that the bikini top and background (with distant figures) are photographic. In Adler's work, drawing works as the bearer of the image, it has to hold the image – particularly, it has to carry the human figure, that pictorial element which is the center of every image and yet, systematically excluded from straightforward photographic reproduction in Adler's work.

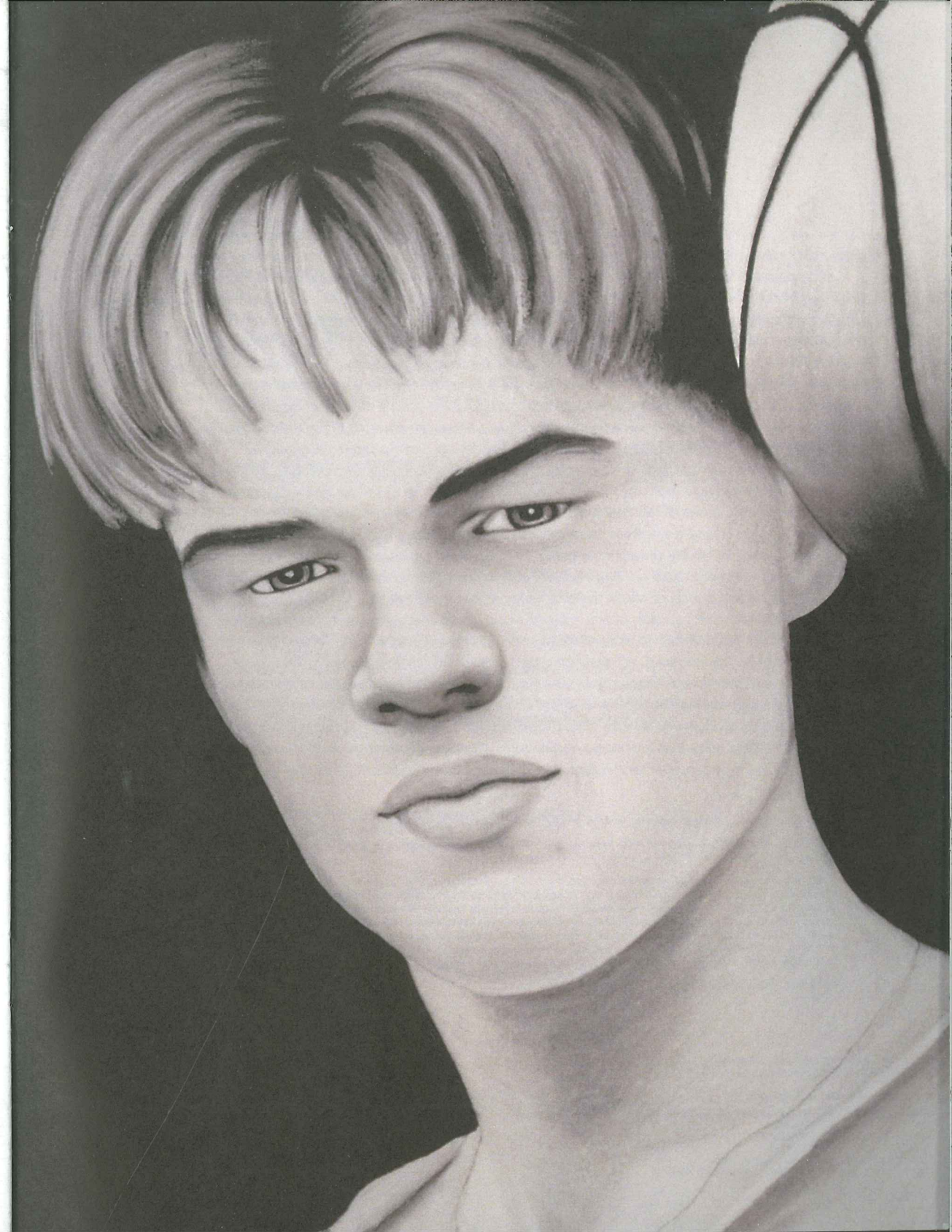
Other artists, such as Sherrie Levine or Richard Prince, have used rephotography to re-author an existing image, to refocus and recompose pictorial elements, and to invest new desires into existing visual scenarios. Yet Adler's insistence on manually rendering her figures with pastels, physically re-transcribing them, seems both lovingly intimate and oddly aggressive: the gesture reproduces a pre-existing image but also cancels it out, replaces it: leaving in its place a hand-drawn substitute that cannot be mistaken for the photographic source, that insistently attests to the artist's manual, bodily intervention. Elsewhere I have suggested that this kind of drawing has less to do with traditional associations of the hand with mastery, virtuosity or the expressive subjectivity of the artist than with a kind of emotional weight and bodily transaction, with drawing as a form of subjection and labor. And Adler herself has discussed how the photograph – both as source material and as rephotographed











frame – works to set strict constraints on the intervention of the hand, holding the reprocessed image strictly to the visual structure of the original.[4]

In the series of faces that peer out from the pages of this catalogue, all are details from works by Adler from the past few years. The five figures don't particularly resemble one another: two male, three female, all relatively young and attractive, it's not initially clear what holds them together. If anything, they present a catalogue of Adler's different drawing styles and different degrees of technical manipulation. Yet they share a quality of self-consciously rendered interiority that leads me to consider *all* of them to be Adler's "self-portraits." What links them is not so much likeness or resemblance as this intense focus on *touch*, on the hand-drawn mark, that transforms the surface of the drawing into a palpable presence – as if all these figures were different aspects of one person, or as if the same subject were looking at us from different faces, from within different skin. In *Surfing*, the re-photographed background provides a very defined space in which the figure looms oddly: the flesh seems so heavy, so voluminous, the drawn figure isn't fully "in" the scene. Her gaze peers off at something we cannot see; yet the scene visually surrounds her, contains her. She presents herself as an image to the camera, and yet there is this gaze around the figure in which she also takes in the scene surrounding her as an image.

As Lurie notes, part of the conventional appeal of photography is the promise of a seamless, spatially continuous image of a social reality we actually confront as fractured and dispersed. It promises a model of vision which is exterior, stable, veridical and grounded in the referent, so unlike the vision we every day experience as corporeal, temporal, subjective, and potentially faulty. Adler understands that the technology she uses will soon become outdated, replaced by techniques allowing "a more potentially malleable landscape." By inscribing the hand-drawn figure into the center of the photographic image, Adler insistently recorporealizes vision, resubjectivizes it, to insist on the status of perception as inseparably bodily, psychic, and laden with fantasy. And just as the subjectivities which she depicts disrupt continuities of body, memory and identity, Adler's constructions disturb the spatial continuity of the photograph, forcefully presenting her images as amalgams of human and mechanical effort which carry their own history and processes of construction as a visible and even disconcerting residue.

1. The classic analysis of this is Allan Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," *October* #39, 1986, pp.3-65.

2. Celia Lurie, *Prosthetic Culture: Photography, Memory and Identity* (London: Routledge, 1998). This article relies on a number of concepts developed in Lurie's text.

3. The only difficulty with this model is that the very term "prosthetic" seems to imply that things could somehow be otherwise, that a more discrete, bounded selfhood could exist free of such mimetic incorporations. But subjectivity, by definition, is founded on this ongoing internalization of what was once "external"; any sense of self emerges and takes shape precisely through ongoing processes of identification and introjection. What Lurie's work does provide, however, is a means of extending our understanding of subjectivity, to see it as operating to identify with and internalize a whole range of "objects" that include not only other people but also images, capacities and experiences which are continually expanded via technology.

4. Liz Kotz, "Amy Adler: Surrogates," *Art & Text* #61, 1998, pp.28-31.

Surfing, 1997, c print 30" x 40" (detail shown in catalogue centerfold)
Collection of Gary and Tracy Mezzatesta, Los Angeles

catalogue images in order of appearance:

Raising Your Gifted Child, 1997, cibachrome print, 50"x 38" (detail)
River, 1997, c print, 40" x 30" (detail)
Surfing, 1997, c print, 30" x 40" (detail)
Sport, 1995, c print, 24" x 18" (detail)
King, 1994, silver gelatin print, 50" x 38" (detail)
Images courtesy of the artist and Casey Kaplan, New York.

Amy Adler

Born 1966 in New York City; lives and works in Los Angeles

EDUCATION

1987 Hochschule der Künste, Berlin, Germany
1989 The Cooper Union, New York, BFA
1994 American Photography Institute, National Graduate Seminar, NYU, New York
1995 University of California, Los Angeles, MFA

ONE PERSON EXHIBITIONS

1994 **Amy Adler – Photographs**, TRI Gallery, Hollywood
1996 **What Happened to Amy?**, Casey Kaplan, New York
1997 **Once in Love with Amy**, Casey Kaplan, New York
1998 **Focus Series: Amy Adler**, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles
The Problem Child, Entwistle Gallery, London, England

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

1990 **Empire State Biennal**, Eversion Museum of Art, Syracuse
1992 **Twisted Vision/Version (The Irony Show)**, Four Walls, Curated by Trudie Reiss, Brooklyn, New York
Neurosis, Artists Space, New York
1993 **Loose Slots**, Temporary Contemporary, Las Vegas, organized by Richard Kuhlenschmidt
1994 **Summer 1994**, TRI Gallery, Los Angeles
Super Woman, University of California, Irvine
1995 **In A Different Light**, University Art Museum, Berkeley
A Glimpse of the Norton Collection, Santa Monica Museum of Art, Santa Monica
Self-Portrayal, POST, Los Angeles
Greatest Hits, TRI Gallery, Los Angeles
Smells Like Vinyl, Roger Merinas Gallery, New York
1996 **Stream of Consciousness: 8 Los Angeles Artists**, University Art Museum, UC Santa Barbara, curated by Liz Brown
Skin Deep, Thomas Solomon's Garage, Los Angeles
Be Specific, Rosamund Felsen Gallery, Santa Monica, curated by Michael Duncan
Gender, Fucked, Center of Contemporary Art, Seattle, curated by Catherine Lord
1997 **Spheres of Influence: Selections from The Permanent Collection**, Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles
The Name of the Place, Casey Kaplan, New York, organized by Laurie Simmons
1998 **Phoenix Triennal**, Phoenix Art Museum, Phoenix
Where is your rupture?, The Swiss Institute, New York

AWARDS AND FELLOWSHIPS

1994 American Photography Institute, Fellowship, National Graduate Seminar
1994 Levinson Scholarship, University of California, Los Angeles
1994 Los Angeles Center for Photographic Studies, Olson Materials Grant

PERMANENT COLLECTIONS

Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles

SELECTED PUBLICATIONS

1996 Elizabeth A. Brown, **Stream of Consciousness: 8 Los Angeles Artists**, University Art Museum, University of California, Santa Barbara

1994 David E. Greene, **Los Angeles Reader**, August 19, p.25
Susan Kandal, "Team Players," **The Los Angeles Times**, October 14, p.F24
Jan Tumlir, "At Far Remove: Amy Adler at TRI," **Artweek**, October 20, p.18
Liz Kotz, "The Erotics of the Image," **Artpapers**, November, p.17
Terry Myers, "On View: LA," **New Art Examiner**, November, p.37
Jody Zellen, "Autumn in LA," **Art Press**, November, p.68

1995 Robert Atkins, "Very Queer Indeed," **Village Voice**, January 31, p.69
"P.S. I Love You," **Bop**, March, p.69
Rebecca Solnit, "Berkeley Fax: In A Different Light," **Art Issues**, March/April, p.33
Karen Klabin, "Distant Mirror," **Detour**, May, p.120
Michael Cohen, "LA Confidential," **Flash Art**, June, p.57
Michael Duncan, "Queering the Discourse," **Art in America**, July, p.28
David Pagel, "Art and Youth," **The Los Angeles Times**, August 24, p.F12
Cecilia Dogherty, "Identity Crisis," **New Art Examiner**, September, p.31

1996 Chris Myles, "City of Now," **Lingo**, April, p.56
Roberta Smith, "Enter Youth, With Subtlety," **The New York Times**, May 17, p.B1
Elise Harris, "Agit Pop," **Out**, July, p.44
Shelia Farr, "Gender Discomforts," **Seattle Weekly**, July 31, p.35
Todd Hovanec, "Eight is (Sometimes) Great," **Daily Nexus**, October 31
Christopher Knight, "Riding Traditions' Currents to a Higher Consciousness," **The Los Angeles Times**, October 10, p.F4
Elizabeth A.Brown, "Stream of Consciousness: 8 Los Angeles Artists," **Exhibition Catalogue**, September, p.18
Ingrid Schafner, "Amy Adler" **Artforum**, May, p.99
Amy Bloom, "A Face in the Crowd," **Vogue**, December, p.295

1997 David Frankel, "The Name of the Place," **Artforum**, May, p.104
Christopher Miles, "Paper Arcade," **Soma**, May, p.42
Glen Helfand, "The Best Fall Art," **The Advocate**, September 16, p.74
Edith Newhall, "Talent: Amy Adler," **New York Magazine**, September 22, p.105
Holland Cotter, "Amy Adler," **The New York Times**, September 19, p.B33
Linda Yablonsky, "Amy Adler," **Time Out NY**, September 25, p.43
"Best Bets," **The Los Angeles Times**, (OC), October 9, p.4R
David Humphrey, "New York Fax," **Art Issues**, November, p.32
Robert Goff, "Culture Comes to Hollywood," **Forbes**, December 1, p.32

1998 Felicia Feaster, "Amy Adler, Dana Hoey," **Artpapers**, January/February, p.54
Elise Harris, "Top of the Pops," **Out**, February, p.48
Regina von Planta, "Amy Adler in der Entwistle Gallery," **Das Kunst Bulletin**, March, p.35
Shonagh Adelman, "Amy Adler," **Frieze**, March/April, p.79
Rachel Campell Johnson, "Around the London Galleries," **The London Times**, March 10, p.37
Tania Guha, "Amy Adler," **Time Out London**, April 1-8, p.45
Elizabeth Hayt, "Evoking the Fitful Passage to Womanhood," **The New York Times**, May 10, p.50AR
Liz Kotz, "Ami Adler: Surrogates," **Art/Text**, May/July, p.28
Linda Yablonsky, "Amy Adler," **BOMB**, Summer 1998, p.81, p.104