

## Looks, Gazes, Styles

---

Liz Kotz

How to diagnose the current situation of photography? These days galleries confront us constantly with large, sumptuous color images of staged, posed, semi- and faux-documentary subjects, a re-legitimized pictorial practice somehow situated in relation to the legacies of the 1980s. One could list any number of names associated with this moment: Gregory Crewdson, Tracey Moffat, Inez van Lamsweerde, Laurie Simmons, Anna Gaskell, Dana Hoey, Jennifer Bornstein, Sharon Lockhardt, Jeff Burton, and many more. Technically, stylistically, this "new photo" ranges from images which appear close to snapshots or "straight" photography and claim some relation to Conceptual art, to work using professional-level, "cinematic" staging, make-up and lighting, to more intensely computer-manipulated images. Yet rather than defining discrete areas of practice (as they might once have done), these disparate techniques function more as a continuum of pictorial technologies: more ways to make pictures. Photography is now a generalized technology to make large color images, surrogates for the myriad pictorial functions painting once played.

Partly, this reflects changes in technology: mural-size color printers are everywhere, and every art school seems to have them. Digital technologies make relatively advanced image manipulation accessible to anyone with a decent computer, rendering the color image increasingly pliable to after-the-shot alteration. And technical advances pioneered by cinema and advertising photography accustom us to the endless choreography and enhancement of the pro-filmic and photographic. "Photography," once a set of relatively continuous optical and chemical processes, is dispersed among an aggregate of possible technologies, recording media, and output formats. But the giant color images one sees everywhere—in galleries, on buildings, and in the street—also represent a deeper cultural shift, one in which long-repressed narrative and pictorial modes re-emerge in an enlarged scale.

The recent exhibition "Another Girl, Another Planet"<sup>1</sup> was symptomatic of the extent to which this once (relatively) varied set of practices has gelled into a trend, one which is all-too-conscious of its own photographic genealogy. An *Artforum* reviewer claims that "the show may signal the emergence of the first generation of artists to take for granted the twin (if antithetical) lessons of Cindy Sherman and Nan Goldin."<sup>2</sup> Leaving aside the curious claim of "emergence" for a practice that has been ubiquitous for some time—youthful female artists making large pretty color photos of adolescent females in a variety of staged, quasi-narra-

<sup>1</sup> Held last spring at Lawrence Rubin Greenberg Van Doren Fine Art, NYC, March - April 1999.

<sup>2</sup> Katy Siegel, "Another Girl, Another Planet," Lawrence Rubin Greenberg Van Doren, New York," *Artforum* (September 1999): 161. See also Janet Kraynak's far more critical, and to my mind more perceptive, assessment in *Documents*, no. 15 (Spring/Summer 1999). I'm not sure what to make of the proliferation of adolescent scenes in this predominately female art. The art world has been trafficking in images of nubile young bodies at a rate to rival Hollywood or network television. Unlike the mass media, however, the art world can't use the alibi of trying to target a youth audience—teenagers don't seem to buy much art.

tive scenarios—one is struck by the shorthand antithesis Sherman/Goldin, struck by how it both makes sense and quickly falls apart.

It is received wisdom now, this assumed opposition between a staged and constructed pictorial photography, on the one hand, and a presumably unstaged and spontaneous documentary image on the other—a tale as old as photographic modernism. Yet if we look back, say, at earlier Goldin, when she wanted to make her gangly drag queen friends look like fashion models and movie stars, it's not too hard to see that her project has enormous overlap with Sherman's. For all the rhetoric, "Boston School" and postmodern photography shared the same conditions of image culture. A few years ago, I remember looking at postcards of (I think) Jeff Wall, Tina Barney, and Philip-Lorca diCorcia at the MoMA gift shop and understanding that they were all the "same"—that whatever previous differences between documentary, mock document, and utterly staged photography once animated them, such differences no longer mattered, no longer functioned. This complete implosion of the structuring oppositions of modernist photography (and, in its related institutions, the opposition of news/entertainment) creates the conditions for what has happened in photography of the past decade.

The work of Collier Schorr, who began exhibiting photographs around 1994, is part of this current moment, yet also at a certain distance from it. Schorr's images, often shot in Germany, tend to feature androgynous and ambiguously posed young people in outdoor settings, girlish boys and boyish girls in suggested narratives. An early series, *Night and Day* (1994) exhibited at 303 Gallery in New York, still strikes me as the most genuinely affecting. It combined smaller black-and-white images and larger color photos of a skinny teenage boy, standing shirtless in the countryside. Bits and pieces of a "story" enter the scene—a friend's arm around his shoulders, a hint of lipstick. Partially obscured by underexposure, details flicker but never produce a clear-cut narrative. Shot in deep shadow, sometimes wearing make-up, the figure's gender and sexuality become uncertain, unhinged—a slipperiness heightened by a single image of Schorr herself. The images bounced off one another curiously; alternately ordinary and suggestive. With little to ground them in time, place, or internal relationships, they produced a sense of a private world or fantasy landscape, both pastoral and perverse—a feeling recreated in a linked, subsequent series of young women dressed in boys underwear and bound breasts (*North of No South*, 1995-96).

Schorr was playing a set of games with our perception and (mis)readings of images and series, games with a real sense of mystery and discovery, often hinged on the fascination of precariously gendered figures. The re-appearance of the same handful of individuals (some of whom vaguely resemble the artist) in shifting scenarios quickly suggested that Schorr was staging fantasies with surrogate figures—a curious female permutation of Larry Clark's (stated) project of recreating a lost adolescence via idealized young male bodies. Schorr's images emerged in a post-ACT UP period when urban lesbian cultures had taken on many of the

<sup>3</sup> Although, perhaps because Schorr's photos weren't exhibited until 1994, she wasn't included in either the Boston ICA's "Dress Codes" exhibition, or the Guggenheim's "Rose Is a Rose Is a Rose: Gender Performance in Photography." For a reading of her work as an investigation of masculinity, see Bruce Hainley, "Like a Man," *Artforum* (November 1998): 97-98.

styles of gay-boy culture, and a number of younger female artists were exploring masculine figures, a moment in which every other dyke in the East Village wanted to look like a teenage boy.

Naturally, Schorr's work was read in relation to a number of intersecting 1990s concerns: the exploration of gender ambiguity and performance, the representation of identity, the cultural fascination with adolescence.<sup>3</sup> But with a low key look closer to the snapshot aesthetics of, say, Mark Morrisroe or Wolfgang Tillmans, Schorr's work often seemed to dodge the demand for obvious "identity issues." This obliqueness gave it an appeal, as did the distance from a more melodramatic, over-produced genre of staged photography beginning to proliferate by the mid-90s (no overt surrealism or David Lynch references here). Overall, the images are shot pretty "straight": a little color shifting, some play with exposures and tonal contrasts, but little overt pictorial manipulation. The scale is modest, mostly in that 18" x 24" or 21" x 21" C-print range, though some go up to about 30" x 40".

By 1996 or 1997, Schorr's project shifted, and the fascination with young male bodies, now often militarized, has intensified. The dreamier "southern gothic" feel of earlier series is gone, replaced by a more starkly realist look. In their technical precision, saturated colors, and cool light, the newer images recall recent German photographs, but not their typological underpinnings. There's a strange distance to Schorr's work, a sense of removal and inaccessibility. Especially in more recent images assembled here for *Documents*, it's not clear what holds the individual pictures together, why or how they exist as series or groups: skinny young men in military outfits, acting like they're at summer camp, shot in Germany and in New York; a pair of young women, arm in arm; lots of pale skin and greenery.

Of course, this remove is crucial to Schorr's work. She's been able to preserve a tension: you want to project into the images, but you can't get the whole story, you can't connect. There's something manipulative and withholding, highly seductive. It's hard to say why this works in some shots and not in others. Aside from *Field Training* (1997), with its lush white torso lying supine on green grass, the recent images have a flatness or blankness that recalls journalistic or magazine images. A picture of a young boy playing with a gun in the woods (*Shooting*, 1997) feels conventional, contrived; it reminds me of Jeff Wall's work. A boy in uniform reading Lenny Bruce (*Freak*, 1998) likewise feels somehow forced. There's a coolness to these images, a prosaic quality, that could be a response to the proliferation of pretty girl pictures of late.

A friend comments that Schorr's images all seem to say, "look at where I am," and indeed it's impossible not to contemplate the relation between the mid-30s artist and her young, mostly male subjects. Are we simply watching someone else stage their fantasies, all dressed up in military drag? For some reason, this becomes a stumbling block; it reminds me of a recent exhibition by Elizabeth

Peyton in which she hung casual snapshots of her and her (increasingly famous) friends alongside her painted portraits. Schorr's subjects certainly aren't celebrities, yet there's an "inside" quality that gets irritating, the extended presumption that not knowing what is going on will keep us interested. This is not just an issue particular to Schorr, but a structural problem in much recent photography. Critics like Roland Barthes once proposed that this projective relation to images rests on our capacity for strange personal investments in the detail and the aberrant, non-intentional; it's not clear how to create affect when every effect feels planned.<sup>4</sup>

In the meantime, of course, a certain photographic territory has shifted, and gotten much more crowded, as successive waves of Yale grads and others have flooded New York galleries with carefully constructed narrative images of adolescent female fantasies and adventures. It's not immediately clear how Schorr is positioned vis-à-vis this more recent work. One could argue, for instance, that Anna Gaskell and Dana Hoey have borrowed some motifs from Schorr, eliminating the gender ambiguity and heterosexualizing their subjects. But Schorr herself has also absorbed a great deal from other, mostly male, models: Tillmans, Larry Clark, Jack Pierson (himself a master borrower and stylist), et al, and her work is no stranger to the fantasy appeal, narrative hooks, and voyeurism so overtly courted by many younger female artists.<sup>5</sup>

Intrinsically structured by repetition, photography operates precisely through this continual recirculation and reappropriation of looks, gazes, and styles—it's hard to make proprietary claims. Like a number of younger artists, Schorr has generated her project in the wake of the renewed embrace of "staged" and pictorial photographs and of modes of artifice, decoration, and narrative more generally, long repressed in visual modernism (hence the relatively recent retrospectives of Julia Margaret Cameron and Florine Stettheimer), an embrace which has occurred alongside the implosion of core modernist projects like geometric abstraction or documentary photography. Yet while a great deal of current projects presume to locate themselves in the legacies of conceptual or postmodern photographs, one increasingly feels that their ultimate destination is advertising.

Something here feels like it's come full circle and is rapidly losing energy. It's been about twenty years since Richard Prince started to take photographs of advertisements, looking at them as if they were movie stills, to crop and isolate certain potentially resonant narrative moments. In his books, he subsequently mixed in quasi-personal snapshots that he'd shot himself with his art of borrowed images and with art by others. Somehow it all added up. Now we get endless art images shot to look like other art images that were themselves shot to look like snapshots or film stills that ultimately all end up looking like ads; it all gets pretty confusing but not necessarily interesting.

<sup>4</sup> To adopt Barthes' terms from *Camera Lucida* (1981), by its very definition as a private, haphazard, accidental meaning, the *punctum* isn't the *punctum* if it's the same for everyone; then it is the *studium*—the coded, official, public meaning.

<sup>5</sup> There are, of course, real differences to be teased out: Schorr's imagined address is much gayer, and certain images, such as the military scenes, operate in relation to porn scenarios, as Schorr's photo spread in *Honcho* attests. Yet where for Jack Pierson or Jeff Burton, working in porn photography seems to be mainly just a way to make a living, for Schorr, it's about fantasied identifications, about gay male culture as an idealized object of desire.



Back (Sven), 1997.



Scarlet (Intrepid), 1998.