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A Tale in Pictures of Pictures 'Anne Collier,' a Photography Retrospective at Bard College

By KAREN ROSENBERG JULY 31, 2014



An installation view of the 2011 works "Painting (Patrick Lichfield)" Nos. 1, left, and 2.
Chang W. Lee/The New York Times

ANNANDALE-ON-HUDSON, N.Y. — In one of Anne Collier's signature works, the photographic diptych "Woman With a Camera," we see two stills of Faye Dunaway in the 1978 thriller "Eyes of Laura Mars." Ms. Dunaway, playing a fashion photographer who has visions of murder scenes every time she tries to take a picture, is seen staring through her viewfinder and then lowering her camera with a look of horror.

"Anne Collier," this conceptual photographer's midcareer retrospective at the Center for Curatorial Studies at Bard College, surrounds this strong but vulnerable heroine with other women with cameras: Marilyn Monroe, as photographed by Bert Stern, playfully peering over the top of a Nikon; an anonymous, bare-breasted African tribeswoman on a vintage postcard, with a giant lens masking her face; a naked model on the cover of a 1978 copy of the French photo magazine *Zoom*, her head replaced entirely by a camera. And it presents Ms. Collier as the ultimate Woman With a Camera, one who is wise to the sexist biases that have plagued the history of photography and the representation of female photographers.

Because she is taking pictures of existing photographs, Ms. Collier initially comes across as a younger incarnation of Pictures generation artists like Barbara Kruger, Sarah Charlesworth and Laurie Simmons. She certainly shares their concern about the sexualization of women in mass media, as is apparent from the many works here that show female nudes being used to sell cameras.

But unlike her predecessors, she holds her source material at arm's length. We see that she is working with objects, not just images: albums and magazines and books and posters, often creased or marked with sticky notes, each one set against a clean black or white surface that becomes part of the final picture. It's as if she were documenting these things for archival purposes, or maybe photographing them for sale on eBay (which, it so happens, is where she finds much of her printed matter).

That framing makes her work look cool, distant, even detached. Certain pieces play up that quality; note the casual nod to Andy Warhol in "Double Marilyn," a shot of two side-by-side, identical LP covers featuring the image of Monroe, or the double portrait of Cindy Sherman in drag, smoking a cigarette (as photographed by Mark Seliger for *L'Uomo Vogue*).



"Double Marilyn" (2007)
 Courtesy of the artist; Collection of Dean Valentine, Los Angeles



"Developing Tray #2 (Gray)" (2009)
 Credit Courtesy of the artist; Private Collection

But when you look at a whole body of Ms. Collier's work, you start to see that aloofness as a facade. You realize that some of the objects she is photographing include self-help audiotapes with titles like "Fear," "Anger" and "Despair," or that the single eye coolly regarding you from a rephotographed print (still lying in its developing tray) is her own. And you might see those works, and much else in the exhibition, as candid self-portraits.

In his catalog essay, the show's curator — Michael Darling of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, where the show will appear this fall — sheds light on the flea market and used-book-shop finds that have inspired many of Ms. Collier's works. (She has been known to dig deep when something really interests her, as when she located a 1970s California tourist poster of a nude on a beach and later scoured eBay for negatives from the photo shoot.)

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One of her oddest finds is a series of discussion prompts or teaching aids, which she picked up on the street in the East Village; taken out of context and photographed in plain manila folders, they pose generic questions like "Why is this important?" and "How do we know what we know?" They remind you of the wry, self-effacing texts of John Baldessari, with whom Ms. Collier studied at the California Institute of the Arts, and though they don't seem to have much to do with her main theme of women and cameras, they share the skeptical, probing quality of Ms. Collier's other works.

Often, that skepticism is directed at male fashion and celebrity photographers of a certain era: Patrick Lichfield, an English society photographer also known for calendars featuring nude ladies of leisure, or Douglas Kirkland, whose book of portraits of famous performers, "Light Years," figures in several of Ms. Collier's photographs. Sometimes the women in the pictures are simply models, like the Sunday painter, naked, in one of Mr. Lichfield's photo books; sometimes they are complicit in the construction of their own images, like Mr. Kirkland's Judy Garland or Steven Meisel's Madonna.

Works like these are essentially retrospective, holding up photographic clichés of the recent past for our edification. While this is an interesting exercise, it's very much a historical one — rooted in old tools, practices and definitions of photography, and dependent upon the vintage aesthetic of the thrift store find. Walking through the show, you might wonder: Do the cameras now at our fingertips, and elsewhere on the body in glasses and smartwatches, give women more agency or less? Where does the C-list celebrity profiting from her Instagram feed fit into Ms. Collier's pantheon of women with cameras?

In her catalog essay, the Whitney Museum of American Art's film curator, Chrissie Iles, distinguishes Ms. Collier from the Pictures Generation artists: "Collier's relationship with her subject matter takes place at one remove, and at a greater historical distance, within a social culture transformed by the Internet, in which the linear trajectory of history has collapsed into a flat matrix of information, influence and temporal fluidity."

As savvy and elegant as this show is, it makes you wonder what would happen if Ms. Collier tapped into that newer, more slippery photo culture.

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