

Zoe Leonard
MATRIX/BERKELEY 143

University Art Museum
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Iolo Carew—Wearing My Slip, 1981



Zoe Leonard thinks of herself as an investigator. Her photographs reveal a keen attention to ornament and ritual display as well as to the social forces expressed by these phenomena. The images in this exhibition range from a fashion model to a bullfight to an 18th-century wax anatomical figure—images which are as compelling in juxtaposition as they are individually. While isolating images of cultural significance, Leonard's photographs also capture moments of strange beauty. They are contemplative, rather than didactic, reading like a riddle the answer to which is never the same twice.

"There is only desire and the social, and nothing else," wrote Deleuze and Guattari in *Anti-Oedipus*.¹ This remark, which derives from a central tenet of Surrealism, provides a key to understanding Leonard's work. For Leonard, too, desire courses through everyday life to the extent that everyday life itself—the totality of its patterns and rituals—is nothing more than concrete evidence of intersecting forces of desire. Leonard's photographs capture moments when the power relations which define the outcome of desire are tuned to their highest pitch.

In *The Care of the Self*, the third volume of his "History of Sexuality," Michel Foucault identified two types of desire which he called by their Latin terms, *voluptas* and *gaudium*. He describes *voluptas* as "a pleasure whose origin is to be placed outside us and in objects whose presence we cannot be sure of: a pleasure, therefore, which is precarious in itself, undermined by the fear of loss, and to which we are drawn by the force of a desire that may or

may not find satisfaction." *Gaudium*, on the other hand, is a state of self-awareness that is not caused "by anything that is independent of ourselves. . . It arises out of ourselves and within ourselves."² While Foucault recognized that the shifting balance between these two modes defined a crucial moment in the early development of modern Western society, we learn from Leonard's photographs that the interplay between *voluptas* and *gaudium* continues to shape society today.

Much feminist photography of the 1980s (e.g., Barbara Kruger, Cindy Sherman) might be said to provide a critical reading of *voluptas* as embodied in an oppressive and objectifying heterosexual male gaze. Similarly, Leonard's photograph of a female anatomical model, which was created presumably by and for male doctors, focuses on a disturbing relation of desire, anxiety, objectification, and control. This model, shown resting in a glass museum case, is flayed from belly to throat, exposing its internal organs. Though undoubtedly grisly, this visceral aspect of the image is less unnerving than the fact that around the model's neck the fabricators have placed a string of pearls.

Other photographs in the present grouping, however, seem to question an exclusively gender-based hierarchy of power. They do so, in part, by introducing—in Foucault's admittedly gender-biased words—the possibility of "the individual who has finally succeeded in gaining access to himself," and who is "for himself, an object of pleasure."³ In contrast to the grotesquely seductive wax woman, it is less clear, for example, that the flamboyant stride of the

Geoffrey Beene runway model exists solely for the pleasure of an all-powerful male spectator. By juxtaposing this image with one of a toreador at the climax of a bullfight, Leonard seems to suggest that the model, too, may be performing out of a sense of self-possessed showmanship. Conversely, the comparison of these two ritual displays might suggest that the bullfighter himself—that quintessential image of male aggression and dominance—is as much a victim of the objectifying gaze as is the fashion model. Are these people, Leonard seems to ask, controlling or being controlled by their situation?

In discussing issues of desire, self-possession, and power, it is worth noting that Leonard's lesbian identity may influence her specific relation to the female subject. For example, the view she gives us directly up the model's skirt certainly suggests Foucault's notion of an externalized desire, or *voluptas*. Nevertheless, the artist contends that the lesbian gaze is fundamentally different from the objectifying gaze of the heterosexual male because her desire is combined with a sense of self-identification (i.e., *gaudium*) and respect.

The opportunity for individual choice in gender-related adornment and behavior is emphasized in Leonard's installation by the inclusion of an image of a cross-dressed man. Again, the artist's juxtapositions are intriguing: how uncannily similar is Iolo Carew's playful, feminine pose to the triumphant stance of the bullfighter. In contrast to the symbolic masculinity of the bull, the toreador, dressed in his tight, ornate costume, indeed also appears to be

something of a feminine figure.

Through images such as these, Leonard draws our attention to how the competing forces of desire are woven into the fabric of society. Her photographs provide compelling evidence that these manifestations of desire remain a complex phenomenon irreducible to a simple dualism of dominance and oppression.

Zoe Leonard was born in 1961 in New York City where she continues to live and work.

Lawrence Rinder

¹ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 29.

² Michel Foucault, *The Care of the Self: The History of Sexuality*, vol. 3, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1988), 66.

³ *Ibid.*

Works in MATRIX (all works are lent by the artist):

Iolo Carew—Wearing My Slip, 1981, black-and-white photograph, ed. of 12, 14 x 20".

Bullfight I, 1986/90, black-and-white photograph, ed. of 6, 30 x 43".

Untitled, 1987, black-and-white photograph, ed. of 3, 24 x 18".

Frontal View, Geoffrey Beene Fashion Show, 1990, black-and-white photograph, ed. of 6, 43 x 30".

Mirror, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1990, black-and-white photograph, ed. of 6, 42 x 29".

Wax Anatomical Model, Full View from Above, 1990, black-and-white photograph, ed. of 6, 30 x 43".

Selected one-person exhibitions:

Fourth Street Photo Gallery, NYC '79; Hogarth Gallery, Sydney, Australia '83; Greathouse Gallery, NYC '85; Gisela Capitain, Cologne, Germany '90 (catalog); Augustine Luhning Hetzler Gallery, Santa Monica, CA '91.

Selected group exhibitions:

Club 57, NYC, *Group Show* '80; Times Square, NYC, *The Times Square Show* '82; Artists Space, NYC, *Selections from the Artists' File* '88 (catalog); Lesbian and Gay Community Center, NYC, *The Center Show* '89; New Museum of Contemporary Art, NYC, *Strange Attractors: Signs of Chaos* '89 (catalog); Augustine Luhning Gallery, NYC '90.

Selected bibliography about the artist (see also catalogs under exhibitions):

Nalley, Jon. "Battling Bigotry," *Outweek* (Oct. 8 '89), 49, 61.

Raven, Arlene, "Fo(u)r Freedoms," *Village Voice* (Oct. 10, '89), 104.

Hirsh, David. "Extraordinary Artists," *My Comrade* (Dec. '89).

Koether, Jutta. "Zoe Leonard," *Flash Art* (Summer '90), 155.

Schwabsky, Barry. "Wendy Jacob/Zoe Leonard," *Arts Magazine* (Oct. '90), 95.

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