

Art Forum- Mason Klein

YANCEY RICHARDSON GALLERY Swathed in latex or bound and laced in modish leather garments designed by the photographer himself, the gilt figures that populate Alvin Booth's photographs are distinctly contemporary. Flexing in various positions, these glistening bodies coated with metallic oils and gold powder clearly reflect present-day obsessions with the body, style, and fashion. As if to underscore this fact, many of these untitled eroticized images are mounted on the wall in a gridded format that expands on the variegated and voyeuristic aspects of the fashion photographer's contact sheet. But such commonplace fixations alone would scarcely command attention were they not framed--literally in this case--by historical reference, that is, in soldered metal made by Booth to recall the leaded glass of the nineteenth century. A period nostalgia is further accentuated by the artist's labor-intensive techniques, through which he produces grainy sepia-toned gelatin-silver prints, peppered with burn marks or other calculated effects of distress. These are printed on matte paper the exquisite tones and patchiness of texture of which also evoke early photographic efforts. Taken as a whole, such effects create a pastiche of the history of the medium. As it so happened, a selection of classic nude studies by the Hungarian-German photographer Ferenc Berko, taken between 1938 and 1942, were simultaneously on view in the gallery and served as an inadvertent foil for Booth's work. Berko's idealized figures, exemplary of that period's experimental meditations on the abstract potential of the photographed nude, offered a great contrast to the psychological, carnal presence of Booth's models and further set in relief the more embattled complexity of his enterprise. It is as if Booth were trying to reclaim for photography a formal quality of "otherness"--his pictures often seem painterly or drawn--while also alluding to the exploitation of the exotic characteristic of nineteenth-century travel photography. The openness and vulnerability of Booth's sitters, their willingness to submit themselves to an aestheticized sadomasochism, ironically re-create the spectacle of the "exoticized other." Advertisement In the 1996-97 series "Myopia Boxes," miniature views of anatomical details are seen through the prisms of magnifying glasses set into carefully constructed soldered glass containers (like the metal frames, also made by the photographer). Here Booth uncovers the body in order to reveal, as he has stated, its "opaqueness." While these works underscore a general voyeuristic impulse, their interest lies mostly in their allusion to the widespread "curios" of the early daguerreotype, particularly of the French pornographic variety. While a coupling of shiny, golden feet or the enhanced jewel-like musculature of a hand may catch one's eye, for the most part the anonymity and over-stylization of these photographs make them less compelling than other works in the show. It is in an untitled series of ghostly images produced by the brushing of light-sensitive chemicals and bleaches directly onto paper that Booth most clearly invokes photography's origins, while also reclaiming craft as an integral part of his practice. Strongly resembling graphite drawings, the works hover ambiguously between media, just as the figures in them appear alternately as pure form and corporeal impression. Mysteriously laden with narrative potential, these works seem most successfully to speak to the sensibilities of a perhaps irretrievable past and possess a sexuality otherwise lost in the disingenuous and performative nature of the contemporary high-fashion image. COPYRIGHT 1999 Artforum International Magazine, Inc. COPYRIGHT 2000 Gale Group