

Essay By Charlotte Cotton:1998

The photographer's studio is a space pregnant with potential. It is an arena in which the combined drama of photographer and model, light and lens will unfold. This is a space where the codes of behavior and the distinction between the real and imaginary become confused. It is a safe place, also, where the photographer and model are at liberty to experiment and play. A desire to attain an exquisite balance between all mitigating factors has commenced.

A single light source warms and softens the velvet-lined space of Alvin Booth's studio. This intimate place is where they perform their kinetic dance. The light is moved with ease, responding to the spontaneity of their movement and pares down the illumination to its most revealing. Booth's medium format camera is hand held. It becomes integrated into the synergy of the moment and does not dictate the precise angle or composition of the model's self-expression.

An unexpected mix of yesteryear music fills the studio. Hungarian gypsy music, Spanish cha-cha-cha, 1940's Jazz and Prokofiev's symphonies each take their turn as the aural backdrop to the scene. The puck-like model exudes a confidence with her performance. A mirror positioned at the back of the studio quenches her thirst to see her self-discovery as it unfolds. Her protective layer of body paint galvanizes her to move beyond the conventions of posing and closer to the playful expression that she and the photographer determine.

Booth's sense of composition is informed by his love of sensuous sculpture. The work of Gaston Lachaise [1882-1935], Aristide Maillol [1861-1944] and Auguste Rodin [1840 -1917] has left a lasting impression on Booth's aesthetic sensibility. Their monumental forms of turn-of-the-century sculpture, made delicate by exquisite poise, are represented in the dramatically shaded bodies of Booth's photographs.

These photographs communicate the vibrancy of the performances that Booth conducts. He finds models who are inquisitive to see themselves represented within his vision. The energy of their shared curiosity is the driving force behind these images. There are physically demanding hours of work behind each of the photographs that are made possible through the stamina created by this desire for discovery. His passion for sensuous innuendo is manifest in the compositions contained within these pages. His wit and glinting eye infuse the presentation of sexuality within the images. There is a sense that the naughty entendres which create the laughter in his studio are being photographed for us all to enjoy.

The sensuous membrane of skin, with its malleable and radiant qualities, creates the patina of Booth's photographs. Our experience of these images is intensified by the multiple layering of membranous substances. The models' skin is coated with metallic oils and brushed with golden powder. The detailed qualities of their forms are made fully receptive to the studio light. A tactile experience of their posing is transported to the final image. The arabesque of leg or breast, the delicate creasing of foot

or testicle, becomes radiant with the living quality of skin.

There are images where skin is willingly manipulated. Latex string, and rope contort the human surface, emphasizing the abstract and rhythmic sexuality of the body. A second skin of latex acts as mold, corset and re-inventor of the male and female forms. While this second skin may constrain the body, it liberates it from the confines of the living skin. Archetypal male and female forms are united into playful, sexual fusion by the manipulation of the artificial membrane.

The process of layering continues within the confines of the photographic darkroom. The surface qualities of each print are made unique by the combination of light sensitive chemicals and bleaches that are brushed and washed onto the paper. The paper shares with the models' skin a receptiveness to the manipulation of the photographer. Each surface is stretched and reworked, invested with the tangible quality of performance and photography alike.

The warmth and diversity of the tonal range of Booth's images hint at their relationship with photography of the nineteenth century. The soft, textural beauty of photography - the very quality that defined much early photographic practice - is central to this contemporary work. Photography's role in intimate social life, which developed through the nineteenth century, is similarly called to mind. The ecstatic slaves of Booth's images, bound and kneeling, have the sensibility of a Victorian melodrama. The miniature, secretive series of images entitled 'Small Collectors' contain the illicit ambience of pornographic daguerreotypes of the 1850s or French postcards of voluptuous femininity from later in the nineteenth century. The colours of these photographs create a nostalgic feel that heightens our sense of past events and sensibilities. These are the peek-a-boo spectacles of the fin de siècle.

The objectifying eye of early twentieth century photography is referred to in Booth's photographs with dramatic cropping and geometrical posing of the human form. Set against simple backdrops that emphasize pose and character, the arched feet, bursting breasts and sculptural torsos of Booth's confident poseurs dabble with modernist aesthetics. These 1930s Nephatitis, pucks and nymphs regale us with their display for the camera of Alvin Booth.

These images, with their vocabulary drawn from photography's history, are made contemporary by the vibrancy of the human forms. The dynamics of the studio performance are ever present in Booth's photographs. The tactile qualities of skin and motion create the immediacy, the sense of the moment, that resonates through these vibrant photographs.