

Female as Form-Peter Hamilton

Alvin Booth's photographs of the human body are not always of women, but the female sex is a predominant subject for him. His models are many and varied, but it is the sex of the body that is central to his work. The sexual characteristics of the bodies he photographs are his subject matter of preference. Of course in one sense this is unavoidable: photographing an unclothed body - even one seen through a veil - is bound to produce images that display the sexual organs or secondary sexual characteristics. However, Alvin Booth's photographs - and the ways that he works to transform the naked body into particular forms of photographic imagery - are quite explicitly about the *beauty* of the sexualised female form.

Sex does of course have many meanings: though at its simplest it is a binary concept that differentiates between male and female. But sex in another sense, mostly to do with the activity of deriving pleasure from the body, has also become in the last 30 years a central *motif* of contemporary western visual culture. The body - and quite especially the sexualised body - is now so much a feature of art photography and related new media such as video or film, that art galleries have no hesitation in regularly displaying imagery that in another context would be considered pornographic. Indeed it is now possible for art works to be commissioned by and shown in publically-funded venues that could not be shown in other public forms (for instance on TV or as DVD) without some restrictions. Occasionally, such an anomaly has generated moral panics, such as that over the display of some of Robert Mapplethorpe's more explicit imagery when his retrospective toured the USA in the 1980s and 1990s. To see curators of distinguished public museums obliged to defend the artistic merits of certain of his more explicit pictures was good spectator sport. Yet at the same time it also showed that that the old game of "*épater les bourgeois*" is one that is particularly easy to play if some explicitly sexualised images of the body are being shown. To shock is all the more easy if normal conventions about representations of sexuality are the ones being attacked by the evangelising artist. Yet we also live in a world in which commercial pornography is progressively and insidiously more easily and widely available. The old boundaries between licit and illicit are eroding if not wholly abolished in much of western society and this leads to the paradox that an 'art' representation of sexuality may be to all intents the same as a 'pornographic' depiction of a similar activity. However the viewer is invited to evaluate the picture in quite different ways. This is art, this is exploitation. We live in confusing times. Is pornography art? Can art be pornographic?

Alvin Booth has skirted around these questions in his work on a number of occasions. Perhaps his work fits less happily in what has become an over-theorised and highly politicised domain of contemporary art. This may explain why he tends to return periodically to a less edgy and more classical approach to the human form. This is probably because his motivation to photograph in the way that he does involves - if my analysis is correct - another set of interests. These are much more closely connected to his fascination with the body as a sort of theatre, a stage on which many different visual games can be played. He appears to be driven by an overwhelming fascination with a sexualised body - and generally speaking an idealised, young and beautiful female body. It is something that is obvious even in his very earliest photographs. Yet that

hardly marks him out from the very many young people drawn to photography because it offers access to what the camera is seemingly able, in skilled hands, to transpose onto film and paper. Alvin Booth's particular take on that is that the sort of beauty he is interested in is one which he helps to construct. By that I mean that he has always employed the body of his model as a sort of mannequin, a physical form that can serve as the canvas on which a number of decorative elements might be imposed. Iridescent paint and make-up, body oils, various types of ligature, certain materials such as latex that will adopt the body's shape and to a certain extent its texture, but also offer the artist another surface on which to play. The play of light, and the play of form have their counterparts in the play of decoration on the surface - whether that be the body of his model, or the paper on which he makes his prints. It is worth mentioning here that Booth's fine prints are carefully made on large sheets of photographic paper, by conventional silver printing methods. But then another process begins, that of bleaching and toning so that the silver salts fixed in the print are turned into an altogether more impermeable metal. It is a process not unlike the gold toning discovered in the early years of the medium as a means of giving the image greater permanence and that allows us even today to appreciate the best work of the photographers of the 1850s. After the specialised (and secret) toning process the finished print is then carefully framed by Booth in a way he considers appropriate to the image. This will often be a hand-made metal and glass frame that imparts yet another texture and surface to the work, so that each photograph is not merely of a subject that has been worked upon, but is itself an object that has been made into a unique piece of art.

By describing Booth's work in this way we can see that he can best be characterised as a maker-photographer. It is a huge over-simplification perhaps, but there are two sorts of approaches to photography, and thus two tribes of photographers. The first are what I call "seekers", those for whom the world is an endless set of visual possibilities, and who see the act of photographing as a way of fixing the fleeting appearances of that world. In over-simplistic parlance, they go out and photograph what is there. Their art is in the selection and framing of the subject matter. Their overarching goal is to find an image, rather than to construct one. The other great tribe is the "makers", those who see photography as a way of fixing in picture form what they have already visualised. The "maker-photographers" construct something that they can subsequently photograph. Their art lies in the process by which the picture is assembled or constructed, according to the ideas or theories that inspire them. It follows from this that the driving principle of their work is pretty much always to be found within their own minds, and is a reflection in some senses of their interests, their personalities and their values.

The pictures in *Osmosis*, as in most of Alvin Booth's work, are "maker-photographs", and are constructions with many layers. They are depictions of the events that are taking place in a little theatre of his imagination, a stage on which he has brought to life a particular set of his own interests. His studio is the place where the stage first comes into being, a place where he and the model can play with all of these props, with dress and makeup, and lighting and a whole raft of theatrical effects. Usually, the work of construction begins even before the model walks into the studio. Booth often prepares props and costumes, lighting

effects or mises-en-scènes well in advance. His models are sometimes professionals, but more often friends or acquaintances. They know in advance what might be expected of them. This may mean, for instance, that they should depilate before the session in order that their bodies can reveal every nuance of form to the lens. The model is painted or dressed, some detail of the body may be accentuated by a prop, a particular lighting effect might be applied. The photographic process is very simple: Booth has made the vast majority of his work with the same model of medium format camera and the same type of film for the last twenty years or so. His lighting is a mix of tungsten floods and spots. But photographic technique at this stage is in a sense secondary to all other considerations. What is placed before the camera in the symbiotic relationship between him and the model is everything. In many if not all of the pictures shown in this book, the photograph is of a model, a body, that has been simplified or even obscured by some effect of light, make-up, or prop. The use of latex sheets that the model presses her body into creates an extraordinarily formal abstraction. As a result of these multiple layers - that operate like filters - that are placed between the subject and the light-sensitive photographic film, another thing emerges. It began as a living, breathing, speaking person, but it ends up as a form, a thing of beauty that is denuded of any other context than its existence within the frame of the photograph. But we recognise or decode this form because it is of the human body, and that body also has symbolic meaning for us. The viewers. Although Alvin Booth impresses his own secret theatre of the imagination upon what his prints are showing us, the last stage of the process seems to be that he creates in so much of his work the vision of an idealised female form.

Looking closely at both in his work on the body photographed, its decoration and its presentation, and at the enormous care and attention that he lavishes on the process of making a beautiful object out of the print, would it be going too far to suggest that Booth is very often to be found playing with the notion of a "fetish"? It is a term with a number of meanings, of course. But first and foremost it denotes an object that is believed to have magical or spiritual powers. Perhaps in that sense a fetish and an icon are not that far apart. The Orthodox Ikons are religious pictures that are also spiritual objects. Alvin Booth's osmotic images could in that sense be seen as similar types of object-pictures, ones that have magical or spiritual powers, but in another context to the Ikon, one where the spiritual realm is that of the sexualised female form, and her body something that contains a magical power, that of beauty. In this work Booth is using another aspect of what characterises fetishism - the obsessive concentration on particular body details - to produce photographs that celebrate and fetishise the beauty of the female body in an iconic manner. These are photographs that really defy their own starting point as pictures made with a camera, to present an object that is also an image, the female as form.