

SCHWARZ CONTEMPORARY

JENNA WESTRA - Mellow Drama

25 June to 31 July 2021

Jenna Westra's photographs capture a performed intimacy – an ease of movement found in real life, duplicated in the studio. In *Intertwined Women*, I'm unsure where one body ends and the other begins. The feeling of a hand resting on my thigh is transferred through the image – the gesture is so familiar I can imagine the exact weight of the hand pushing down on me. Is it my own hand? Or a friend's? The distinction is inconsequential; the two forms of touch so closely resemble one another.

The overlapping of bodies in Westra's photographs visualizes the often ignored somatic element of friendship between women. The physical closeness echoes the erotics found in sexual relationships, platonically. An intimacy where touching another is like touching yourself, and vice versa. Bodies converge, boundaries cease to exist, traits duplicate.

Male filmmakers – namely Hitchcock and Bergman – have depicted this merging with fear. The blurring of boundaries between two women (often both physical and visual) is shown as a sign of insanity. One woman must violently cut ties with the other to become themselves again. The reality is more nuanced, where the mirroring and merging of bodies is both intense and benign. Westra aptly captures this spectrum of touch.

Portrait photography captures a moment of a performance. As Peggy Phelan writes, »Uncertain about what this body looks like or how substantial it is, we perform an image of it by imitating what we think we look like.«¹ In other words, photographs filter the image you have of yourself through the gaze of the other – in this case, between the models and Westra. The collaborative process, led by Westra through dictating the choreography and poses, establishes an almost psychological transference.

¹ Phelan, Peggy: ‚Developing the Negative: Mapplethorpe, Schor, and Sherman.‘ *Unmarked: the Politics of Performance*, Routledge, 1993, p. 36.

The repetition in Westra's photographs cycles between the self and the other. Westra captures multiple personas of a single person, sometimes in a single image. *Two Vivians (Print)* is a good example of this. In the photograph, a woman stands in front of an image of herself. In the background image, she is intently looking at a glass of water. In the forefront, she stares at the photograph on the wall, confrontationally. The result is drastically different images of the same person. If the real Vivian were to stand in front of *Two Vivians (Print)* she would look different still. If she were to be photographed again in front of said photograph, different again.

»Photographers develop the image as they touch the shutter: models perform what they believe that image looks like,« writes Phelan. Westra pushes this concept further by doubling her subjects, allowing them to see and be seen as both themselves and through her gaze. »The performative nature of portrait photography complicates the traditional claims of the camera to reproduce an authentic ‚real‘« continues Phelan. The studio setting of Westra's photographs already establishes the images as non-real, the careful choreography, coupled with the performance of the models, firmly roots the photographs as fictions.

Where does the viewer situate themselves in these images? Do they see themselves, or the other?

Do they layer their own gaze on the photograph? Or does Westra's gaze dictate the way of seeing? The inclusion of Westra, and the camera itself, in *Self Portrait with Melon, Darkroom Curtains* is noteworthy. By breaking the fourth wall, Westra further accentuates her role as the sole gaze of the images. The part of the curtain reminds me of a pair of spread legs – hinting at the thread of erotics that puncture the work. A similar shape is found in *Braid, Demi-Plié*, articulating the visual alphabet of bodies that runs through the exhibition. A melon sits on top of Westra's crossed and pointed legs, a totem of forms. Read as a metaphor, the perfectly round fruit resembles a circular lens, as well as an iris (the eye and I both present in the image). As Westra performs for herself, an entire show is folded into a single image.

Text: Tatum Dooley

For further information and images, please contact the gallery anytime at: mail@schwarz-contemporary.com