

The Emotive Body in the Photography of Malka Inbal

In an essay entitled “Representation and Presence,” the art historian Sally O’Reilly states, “Over the course of the 20th century, profound developments in art’s relationship with the human form have overturned centuries of convention, radically repositioning the body of the subject, the artist and the viewer. The main thrust of this development has been from passivity to active agency, so that the body is no longer a static optical phenomenon, but the embodiment of dynamic human relations and even a medium of change and influence within the artwork itself.”

At the present postmodern moment in art history, it happens that this new attitude toward bodily representation converges auspiciously with the growing recognition of photography as a major art form on a par with painting or sculpture. No longer must the photographer track daily life like a hunter and lay patiently in wait for that “perfect moment,” that visual epiphany worthy of recording. More and more of our best photographers create their own reality in the studio in a manner that takes their medium far beyond its original documentary function into new areas of autonomous aesthetic discovery.

Asked to name a currently active artist who best exemplifies the merger of these two significant contemporary tendencies, this critic would choose none other than the innovative Israeli photographer Malka Inbal. At first glance, the skillfully distorted human forms in Inbal’s new pictures could recall the paintings of the renowned British artist Francis Bacon. But this initial impression dissipates with prolonged perusal of her work. For while Bacon’s figures provoke the squeamish sense of grotesque lumps of protoplasmic matter, trapped in mortality like meat on a butcher’s block, Inbal’s are possessed of a dancer’s grace that suggests transcendence, as they twist and turn as sinuously as wisps of smoke on the shimmering surfaces of her large black and white prints, whose absence of color yet rich variety of subtle gray tones enhances their overall effect of ethereality.

“In most of my series I dealt with the human soul,” Inbal has stated. “Through my many observations, I’ve staged my works as a type of mirror into human nature, in accordance with my feelings and interpretations.” In this series in particular, the mirror is turned toward the existential condition of the inner self, as reflected in the abstract play of light and shadow on the terrain of the human — and specifically

female — body.

Inbal has also said that light is “the lead actor” in her work, and indeed it assumes a starring role in her latest compositions, illuminating them with unearthly auras. At the same time, however, there is also an undeniable sensuality to Inbal’s imagery, wherein feminine anatomy is reflected as if in a funhouse mirror (once again, that looking glass, originally referenced by the artist herself, recurs as the apt metaphor which springs most immediately to mind), creating a kind of perceptual striptease by revealing the dark areola of a milky white breast or the suggestion of a pubic



“From White to Gray 2”

thicket in a torso that appears to meld with another figure as though in erotic embrace so intense as to melt two bodies into one. One quickly realizes, however, that this mating is strictly symbolic, signifying a spiritual nurturing of the self rather than a sexual union with another.

Yet by virtue of their fluidity, the apparent anatomical anomalies that result from the abstraction of figurative forms in Inbal’s compositions never descend to the level of grotesquery; for set against the silvery swirls that the artist reportedly creates with a mysterious and unique technique involving carefully arranged and folded fabrics exquisitely lit, every element appears constantly in a state of flux, of metamorphosis. Indeed that nothing in her compositions remains stable imbues her pictures with a seemingly limitless allusiveness. As in life itself, one’s consciousness is constantly being buffeted between the sacred and the profane, as mediated by the products of a singularly refined aesthetic sensibility intent on

unflinching self-examination.

For what is being explored here is a communion between the body and the soul to which the artist appears to allude when she says, “In this series I chose to investigate the issue of femininity, a fascinating subject in and of itself, and even more so now when I am in my 50s. At this age, the great fear of loss of femininity has faded away, replaced by inner calm. I choose to enjoy the infinite process of learning and different developments in my life.”

Indeed, one is reminded of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s famous definition of poetry as “emotion recollected in tranquility.” For at the half-century mark, Inbal appears to have achieved an enviable perspective on past experience that enables her to introduce a fresh sense of objectivity into her work, even while dealing with the supremely subjective subject of the body as a conduit for individual consciousness.

As Sally O’Reilly suggested in the essay excerpted at the beginning of this review, more enlightened attitudes toward morality, gender, and sexuality, as well as the forthright presentation of nudity in performance art and other areas of aesthetic endeavor, have revitalized representation of the human body, making it once again one of art’s vital frontiers.

Malka Inbal’s experience of bodies has been more extreme and perhaps more emotionally indelible than that of many others, judging from a quote

included by this writer in a review of one of her earlier exhibitions, which bears repeating here: “I joined the army at the end of the 1973 war, when the corpses were brought from the battles to be buried. One of the female soldiers’ duties was to go with the soldiers’ families and place bouquets of flowers on the graves ... So much sadness and tragedy ... so far from glory ...”

Surely undergoing such a morbid experience in one’s youth must intensify the emotions one feels toward the body, both as a vehicle of pleasure and pain, of joy and mortal destiny. Such intense feelings and the hard-won wisdom they must bring are everywhere evident in the photography of Malka Inbal.

— Byron Coleman

Malka Inbal, Noho Gallery,
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