

Obliged by Nature



CHAPTER SIX

1993

Obliged and Obedient

by Carol McCormick

Paul Rosin's photographs operate on so many different levels, trying to glean some essential meaning, emotion, or even intent out of his art is a bit like slowly peeling an onion, layer by layer, in quest of a pearl. A multitude of translucent thin layers, from tough to tender, they're all skin; there is no ultimate precious center in this work. Rosin's characters are so strong, you can taste them merely by their nakedness, and like any good onion, it's a taunting combination of succulence and repulsion. A hypnotic seduction that draws us inward, from the provocative phrases and dramatic distortions in the photographic emulsion to the sublime quality of the flesh and the enigmatic personality of the subject, we seek in vain the innermost kernel of a privacy that is already exposed. Call it the serpent's apple, a virgin's cherry, or the rotting strawberries in *Death in Venice*. Pretend it's the chocolate from an exquisitely crafted crystal box that the Marquis de Sade poisoned a brothel full of whores with in Marseilles in 1772. Of this forbidden fruit, the skin is the meat. Peel it like an onion and enjoy the tears.

The body geometry in Rosin's art has its own compositional formalism, and though it exists upon a plane of taboo, he brings no codes of morality or sexual preference into its design. He grasps the nature of photography as a fiction, turning it upon itself to the vestigial fantasies of our culture's erotic mythology. Because this vision belongs almost inextricably to the genre of intimate art, it's tempting to perceive the personal, private, and even hermetic quality of these pictures as confessional manifestations of Rosin's own fetishistic obsessions. They are, in fact, far more complex and contradictory. As mock fictions these carefully constructed scenarios insinuate but deliberately avoid specificity. Essentially narrative, symbolic, and lyrically poetic, these pictures are often explicit while remaining inscrutable. Such a voice not only maintains Rosin's own delicate web of ambivalence, but gives full rein to the dynamic of such controversial ambiguities. Whether pornographic or erotic, we are accustomed to dealing with such sexual material in any media primarily as a reaction to the social-political and ascetic intent of its maker and the context of its presentation. Rosin's tangled web of mixed signals however, are enough to short out the wiring for most of us, exposing phobias, convenient misrepresentations, and cherished fictions that exist among us when it comes to gender and role playing.

Naive and innocent, ours is a world that is also corrupt and jaded, where there's a science of nihilism as a romantic faith, where decadence and virtue are slaves of the same narcissistic attraction, where it is getting progressively harder to ignore our own complicated voyeurism and transgression as viewers. The confrontation between eroticism and asceticism is in tragic-comic perspective, one we witness with enough detachment to see the farce while it sucks us into its melodrama of anguish, bliss and desperation. It's an overindulgence delivered with a subtle irony that makes a parody of itself. Deviance, decay, melancholy and absurdity all act as sublime subversions of the erotic mode. Rosin's art is a reflection of these contradictory realities, a psychosexual expressionism in a hysterical, adulterate form. Its extremism is a dangerously discrete hybrid, unsettling because it dodges black and white absolutes and comes up a more solid gray.

For all the various devices and strategies that Rosin brings into play, the predominant characteristics of his work are its mannerist style and hallucinatory effect. Rosin's mannerism is both the hedonism of self-reflection and the phobic terror of introspection. Time as an obedient record, and the antique as obliged measure, participate as phenomenon perverted and converted; both are strong symbolic elements in the development of many of Rosin's narratives. Desire is never specific, because it's not a yearning for anything in particular -- it is a desire for more desire itself. In some way or another, the majority of Rosin's art is involved in depicting the labors and anguish of ecstasy, be it spiritual or biological. It's the moment when desire and denial are balanced that interests Rosin, when rational restraint and physical urgency check but do not nullify each other. The combined assault of the physical and intellectual stimuli is a prime generator of the psychedelic phantasmagoria. In exploring the fear, narcissism, vulnerability, optimism and determination of desire Rosin evokes a picture we cannot see in any of his photographs, a final afterimage as we first turn our backs to walk away. A shard of self-identification that lingers on the scarred surface and comes back as a grotesque questioning of our own self denial. ☺

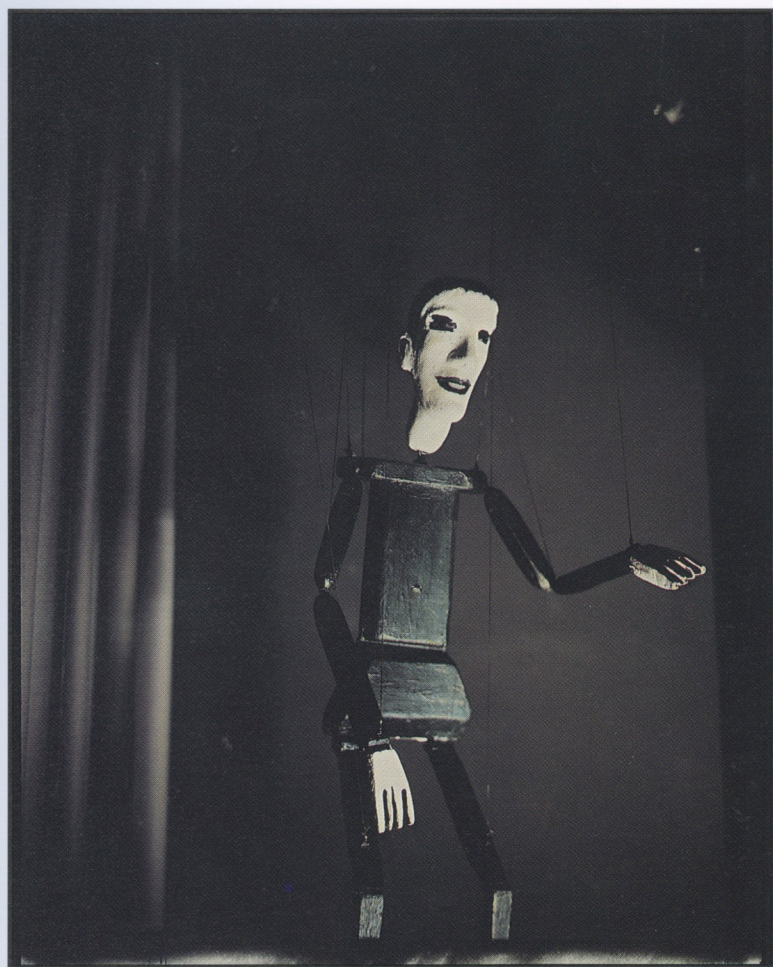
Flesh Unfocused

by Lisa K. Erf

Easter on Amtrak is as good a place as any to begin a discussion of Paul Rosin's photographs. Epitomizing the layered levels of meaning that exist in his work, the image has remained vivid in my mind ever since I first recoiled from it. The picture confronts us with the ass of a woman propped up on all fours on a narrow bed. A pillow lies in the void between her arms and legs, creating a soft transition between her foreshortened body and the darkness of the sleeping car. An over-sized bunny positioned just over the woman's obscured head stares out from the background, giving the scene a sense of surrealistic absurdity. The rabbit's expression possesses a clue of personality that can't be discerned from the figure. Yet, at the same time, it lurks in the shadows of the traincar compartment as protector and peeping tom, alternately affectionate and menacing. The picture is rife with multiple associations: a visual pun of the phrase "fucking like a rabbit" and the Playboy trademark; the fact that the titled holiday commemorates Christ rising from his resting place, and the full moon of the model's buttocks which marks the calendar of the Sunday celebration. There is poetic symmetry in the pairings of eyes and floppy ears, genital orifice and rounded buttocks, and the soles of two bare feet lined up to create a disjointed, compressed figure. In its eroticism and egotism, it exists as both invitation and obstacle to exploring the vagaries of sexuality. It is a haunting photograph of potentiality and inappropriateness.

Frankly, many of Rosin's works make me uncomfortable. Purposefully seductive and irresistibly scandalous, they are an open invitation to the leisure of public voyeurism dignified via art; and yet. . . there is a voice in the back of my head that says I shouldn't be looking this hard or this long. But I do keep looking. His photographs are graphic depictions of people, places, and things in a psychically, often sexually charged state, viewed through an ambiguous lens of wary curiosity and empathetic involvement. Although the pictorial range and narrative content of Rosin's oeuvre covers a broad ground, in my mind, they are always pictures of nudes. Perhaps I come away with this impression because all of his images are in some way about vulnerability and exposure. What is most troubling in Rosin's photographs is not simply their subject -- for there are precedents throughout the history of art, especially Surrealism, as well as erotica -- but the cumulative implication of the photographer's involvement and the impact of explicit images that have no clear or moralizing point-of-view. What fuels my unease is the feeling of supreme amenity that his images have with themselves. There is no inhibition, no holding back, no apprehension about their place in the world. Quite the opposite, as elegantly framed easel-sized public objects of viewer curiosity and consumption, this art has "Attitude." It transmits a sense of self-consciousness and overt production values that seem to contradict its underlying sense of the private and the intimate. My discomfort stems from the complexity of integrating opposite realities.

Since 1980, Rosin has worked in a 20 x 16 inch, uniformly vertical format, framing his gelatin-silver prints identically in heavy black frames. Frequently shooting his subjects through a distorting lens or skewing focus, Rosin manipulates the negative surface by scarring, scratching, typing words, or altering the emulsion with chemicals. He then enlarges the Polaroid negatives onto gelatin paper, often printing the edges of the negative beyond the image border. Finally, many of the prints are toned, subtly hand-colored, or painted with oil and enamel, making each one a unique and labor-intensive object. Rosin's approach is highly expressive, almost "painterly" in the sense of autobiography conveyed through gestural marks and surface distress. This simulated look of the antique seduces the viewer into an illusion of safety in the arms of imagination, distancing the image from the real world or at least from our present time and place. The illusion is somewhat short-lived, however, for what is imaginable within a painting can be problematic, even unacceptable, in a photograph.



RINGMASTER

1988



RED ROPE

1989



LE PENSEUR

1987

Works in the Exhibition

All photographs are 20 x 16 inches and are courtesy of the artist.

The Ringmaster, 1988

silver gelatin print with oil

Decline of Nature, 1986

silver gelatin print with enamel

Easter on Amtrak, 1990

silver gelatin print

Rodin Rapt Eternal, 1987

silver gelatin print with enamel

Le Penseur, 1987

silver gelatin print

Pact (yin yang), 1989

silver gelatin print with oil

Pact (with pets), 1989

silver gelatin print

Ancient Lake, 1986

silver gelatin print

Tax, 1989

silver gelatin print

Mandragora, 1987

silver gelatin print with enamel

1969, 1987

silver gelatin print

Timothy Leary, 1987

silver gelatin print with enamel

Judy Teen, 1983

silver gelatin print

Sea Bitch, 1984

silver gelatin print

Pop, 1991

silver gelatin print with oil and enamel

Wait, 1993

silver gelatin print with oil

Pier Paolo, 1986

silver gelatin print

Van Ghost with Smokestick, 1991

silver gelatin print

Say Yes to No, 1993

silver gelatin print with oil

Over Here, 1993

silver gelatin print

Cryptogram I, 1991

silver gelatin print

Aquarian, 1989

silver gelatin print with oil and enamel

Raggedy Girl, 1987

silver gelatin print with enamel

Aftermath, 1991

silver gelatin print

Flag, 1991

silver gelatin print

Tar, 1989

silver gelatin print

Back Again, 1984

silver gelatin print

Scandalum Magnatum 1987

silver gelatin print

Pompeii, 1987

silver gelatin print

Duce, 1984

silver gelatin print

Red Rope, 1989

silver gelatin print with oil

Alter(ed) Boy, 1987

silver gelatin print with oil and enamel

Cloisters, 1987

silver gelatin print

Via Michelangelo, 1991

silver gelatin print

Shackled Heart, 1991

silver gelatin print with enamel

Chapter Six, 1993

silver gelatin print with oil

Dying Decade, 1991

silver gelatin print with oil

Romantic Landscaping 1987

silver gelatin print with oil and enamel

Birth, 1993

silver gelatin print with oil

Clepsandrian

Equidistance, 1991

silver gelatin print with oil

Exterminating Angel 1984

silver gelatin print with oil

All Roar, 1989

silver gelatin print

Frog, 1991

silver gelatin print

Winter, 1989

silver gelatin print with enamel

Pagan, 1988

silver gelatin print with oil

Twin I, 1990

silver gelatin print with oil

Kiss, 1987

silver gelatin print

Disco Ball, 1984

silver gelatin print with oil, enamel and
typewriting

Nero (Was a Fat Fuck) 1984

silver gelatin print

Emanuela, 1987

silver gelatin print with oil

Spore, 1991

silver gelatin print

From Deutschland to the Promised Land, 1983

silver gelatin print with enamel

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Paul Rosin

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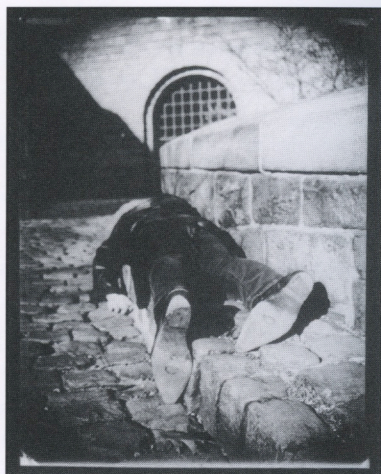
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Flesh Unfocused

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Obliged and Obedient

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