

M+B

Contemporary
Art Review

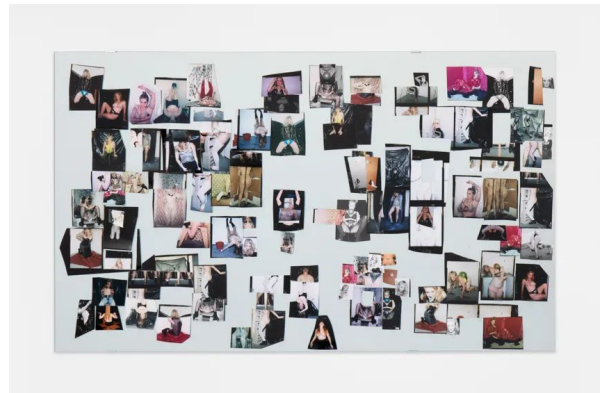
.la

Whitney Hubbs at M+B

November 23, 2022

Text by Jessica Simmons-Reid

Whitney Hubbs' new photographs at M+B exude a mercurial sense of eroticism, their suggestive imagery vacillating from sexually bombastic to poetically covert. The exhibition, nonchalantly entitled *Funny, Ha Ha* (also the title of each work), consists of three photographic collages and five individual photographs, concisely installed so as to emphasize their relationships. The images signal yearning and desire through both performative and introspective modes of inquiry, straddling the threshold between our conscious urges and the subliminal hungers that linger unseen. While *Funny, Ha Ha* unequivocally harnesses the erotic as a relentless wellspring of power, it also leans on salacious yet elusive visual innuendo. The resulting ambiguity invites a plethora of questions, yet withholds firm answers regarding the work's relationship to sexual desire.

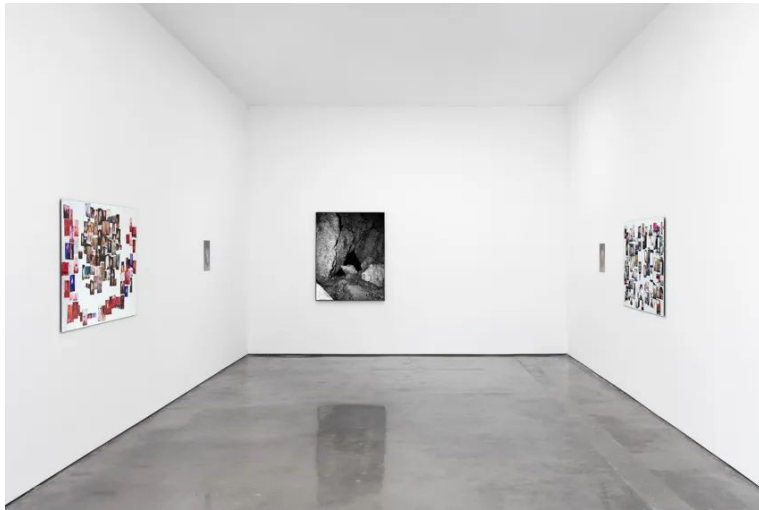


A large, monochromatic image of the mouth of a cave adorns the gallery's far wall, doubling as a seductive visual metaphor for an exposed bodily orifice. The photograph centers the cave, a well-trodden symbol for an enigmatic unknown, as the exhibition's ubiquitous allegory. On the opposite wall, a smaller color photograph gives a bird's-eye view of a clay sculpture resting atop other tactile slabs of clay. The earthen material, a nod to the geologic silhouette of the cave, appears pliable and soft, as if freshly formed. The sculpture is comprised of four breast-like orbs, nipples included, and a double-sided phallus with hints of a vaginal cleft: an exquisite corpse of aroused erotic parts. The remaining three photographs—a black-and-white image of a nearly-wilted rose, and two small images of a stained and partially crumpled paper bag—evoke the delicate, papery surface of skin, suggesting collapsible bodies on the verge of entropy and decay. Much like the cave, this mysterious bag—visibly voluminous from the mass of its unseen contents—can be interpreted as a vessel or shroud for things unknown, alluding, perhaps, to the deep subconscious.

Upending the subtle poeticism of these juxtaposed photographs, the three collages feature cut and taped contact prints of Hubbs in various states of undress, her body bent, torqued, and twisted in erotically charged and cheekily irreverent poses that hinge on the pornographic. Numerous props, such as a prosthetic breast, mirror the disembodied anatomical form of the aforementioned clay sculpture. In one collage, an image of the cavity of a cooked chicken grotesquely recalls both a prone body and the suggestive contours of the gaping cave. Elsewhere, the artist's arm is bonded tightly with wire, her flesh taught and pulled, recalling famed Surrealist Hans Bellmer's discorporate erotic dolls. Each collage is assembled atop a mirror in a disarming gesture that forces the viewer to reckon with their own gaze. Here,

M+B

our reflected bodies become another element of the collage, flattening the void between subject and viewer and creating a false sense of intimacy—the quintessence of voyeurism—with the artist's semi-naked form.



While there is a bold and inherent vulnerability to Hubbs' self-portraits, she imbues her performance with moments of almost juvenile humor (rolling eyes, ghost-like masks, goofy faces, dick jokes), which recall the exhibition's title and complicate the nuances found elsewhere. Her visually arresting images vacillate from poetic to profane and back again, establishing divergent tones that leave viewers with incomplete clues to decipher. Hubbs' cryptic intentions beg a litany of intriguing questions: whose desires are we witnessing and whose subconscious are we mining? Are the artist's performative modes of undress catering

to patriarchal dominance by luring the predatory male gaze, or does she mime these tropes only to subvert them? Are the viewers' tendencies towards objectification neutralized by the looking glass, or are we like Narcissus, caught in the mirror of our subliminal desires? Is the artist cosplaying Bellmer's doll? Is it all just a joke? Perhaps, in the end, the artist is the cave, the chicken, and the paper bag: a corporeal vessel for us to seize and fill with our own erotic projections.