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WHITNEY HUBBS

Interview by Lucas Blalock
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"THE WORK I'VE ENCOUNTERED LATELY HAS BEEN LOOKING AT ITSELF IN THE MIRROR, AND NOW I'M LOOKING AT MYSELF IN THE MIRROR PER SE." — WHITNEY HUBBS

These photographs by Whitney Hubbs for Issue Magazine came about following her solo exhibition "The Song Itself Is Already A Skip" at M+B Gallery in Los Angeles in 2013. The images in the show were above all sensory—filled with evasive light and shadows and for all their eschewal of narrative, incredibly provocative. Last year, her work was featured in "The Black Mirror" curated by James Welling and Diane Rosenstein at Diane Rosenstein Fine Art.

In these new portraits, Hubbs's work turns a corner—out of the daylight and into the studio. The result is what Hubbs calls an instinctual foray into self-portraits. It comes as no surprise then that photographer Lucas Blalock stepped in for a conversation with Hubbs about her newest work. As a photographer, Blalock is interested in the internal information and conflicting realities that a photograph presents to its viewer.

Lucas Blalock: You have recently turned from photographing other models to photographing yourself. Do you consider these self-portraits? I am interested in how your newer work feels drawn between someone like David Lynch (who is constantly using reflexive terms—e.g. Mulholland Drive) or Rimbaud (e.g. "I is someone else") and the deadpan studio site of artists such as Bruce Nauman—where the performance of an activity takes on meaning through its literalness . . . All men, ugh! Valie Export and Maya Deren are super relevant here too.

Whitney Hubbs: The self-portraits came about instinctively. I wanted to make pictures that reflected a renewed ownership of my body and lived experience. I was, and still am, contending with my own fragmentation and feeling out of balance. In the studio, I manipulated these photographs and the repetitive performances in them for self-reflexivity. Making them created immediate problems and accidents that weren't happening when I photographed models or the world outside.

It seemed arbitrary at first to photograph myself, but I followed my intuition in regards to myself as the subject and now it seems so correct. I appreciate that about my creative process. I never map out or pre-plan anything. That way of working, the intuition and the accident, is a meditative state for me.

LB: I am intrigued by your description of these pictures as so personal and yet containing the question at large of "who is she?". Not that this isn't in itself an incredibly palpable (and terrifying) kind of crisis! It makes me want to talk about sympathetic magic and doubt, both of which are sort of absent from how pictures are being considered these days.



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WH: Self-reflection can be a crisis and at the same time so liberating. These self-portraits function more in the latter sense.

To me, when I hear sympathetic magic I think of having empathy for the medium, its problems, and its setbacks—rather than fighting against it and conceiving immediate answers. Doubt creates an ambiguity that draws me back into making more pictures. If the answer was clear cut there wouldn't be this mystery or openness. While the pictures are directorial, they seem to lack any direct meaning. So in-between these is doubt that I can relate to.

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LB: Readers may see these terms as anachronistic, but that is a notion I want to challenge. It seems to me that the role of the artist moved from “genius” to salesman with Warhol, and to critic through Conceptual Art. This is obviously an oversimplification, yet I think artists feel these definitions especially when they are young and trying to find their way. Genius certainly isn't something I am interested in recovering; however, these other roles feel really constrictive. This brings me around to what you are saying because both photography and photographer have bearing here. I wrote a review of Barney Kulok's book “Building”. It said:

“There is though a sense of incompleteness, of investigation, of theater; the feeling of seeing, an awareness of an invisible armature. And it is these latter qualities that situate Kulok's work among the more forward of his peers. After all, it is not a delimited aesthetic or style that the current “crisis” of reflexivity in photography offers, but a far broader and deeper opportunity to think in pictures.”

Something like this is what I want to get to here—basically that “advanced painting” isn't always Abstract Expressionism! Do you think much about how your work relates to the bigger conversation around photography today?

WH: Yes, I do think about it. How can I not? My work is born out of looking and being engaged with both past and contemporary photography. It is also born out of unique, individual experiences. The work I've encountered lately has been looking at itself in the mirror, and now I'm looking at myself in the mirror per se. A personal kind of self-reflection.

LB: Recently I have been challenging myself to think again about photography in terms of time instead of information. Your pictures are interesting to think about in this way. In some ways your work is always acknowledging time (flowers, horizons, bodies), but their internal time is hard to place. Are you thinking about this?

WH: I think of time in what is beyond our control, such as the mistakes and problems with looking. In looking at my subject matter, it becomes an active state of observing and untangling layers and meaning. In my photographs, my subject matter and how I look repeats itself but the results vary.

Whitney Hubbs is a Los Angeles artist noted for her intensely dark prints. Hubbs was tapped as one of Vince Aletti's “Eight Emerging Photographers from Southern California” in The New Yorker (2001) and has been featured in Blind Spot. Her work is held in permanent collections of The Getty Museum (Los Angeles), The Whitney Museum of American Art: Library (New York), and Los Angeles County Museum of Art.