

HOTSHOE

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MATTHEW PORTER

PALE SUBTROPICAL LIGHT





South Carolina (Jane Fonda 1972), 2011





Barefoot (Jane Fonda 1967), 2011





Valley, 2011







“He writes of the chimerical possibilities of ‘psychic and physical slippage’ that a place like Los Angeles can instill in the astute observer, using examples of the disconnect between history and experience.”

Jane Fonda, tropical forests, a Modernist house, a verdant hillside and some empty hornets’ nests — what connects?

Los Angeles is one clue. Another is the imagination of Matthew Porter whose seductive series, *Pale Subtropical Light*, brings these disparate subjects into conjunction.

The title Porter takes from John Gregory Dunne’s essay, *Eureka!* — a celebration of the emancipatory powers of Los Angeles over body and mind. Dunne described his attachment “to the deceptive perspectives of the pale subtropical light” and as the gallery note tells us, “he writes of the chimerical possibilities of ‘psychic and physical slippage’ that a place like Los Angeles can instill in the astute observer, using examples of the disconnect between history and experience.”

Porter is not an artist who seeks to conceal his sources or process. His *Flying Cars* series and *Cowboys & Zeppelins* — their staging and mash-ups — reveal a liking for the absurd. With their nod to sci-fi and fantasy films, as well as car chases, the Wild West and the conflation of impossible worlds, it’s not surprising Porter should have been drawn to making his own statement on the place and psyche from which those fantasies derive.

If *Pale Subtropical Light* were a game, Level 1 participation — requiring little or no information about its subject matter

— would in all likelihood take the viewer first to the Fonda pictures. These re-stage well-known photographs of Jane Fonda, ranging from her sci-fi, sex bomb persona in *Barbarella* (*Positronic Ray*, 2011); her fitness goddess incarnation (*Scissor Lift*, 2011); feted actress in cowboy love story *Electric Horseman* (*Alice*, 2011); sex-kitten (*Barefoot*, 2011) and political activist (*South Carolina*, 2011). But whilst the poses and styling echo the original photographs fairly closely, there is not the least attempt to cast look-alikes in the manner of Alison Jackson’s satirical stagings. The women are all stand-ins — used as one might a professional stand-in on a film or photo shoot: to provide an approximate likeness of height, build and colouring for the director of photography to set-up and light the scene.

Porter says his interest in Fonda comes from the sheer amount of photographic coverage that exists of her at key moments in her life and transformations that have come to stand for milestones in America’s own recent history, just as her image has become short-hand and signifier for virtually every incarnation of female archetype. Porter was born in 1975 as the Vietnam War drew to an end, so was evidently too young to remember Jane Fonda’s notoriously controversial visit to North Vietnam at the time it took place. She went to corroborate rumours of chemical weapons and the bombing of civilian targets by the American Military, and to deliver mail to American POWs. As the gallery note contextualises: “on her last day there, she was driven to

PALE SUBTROPICAL LIGHT

the site of an anti-aircraft gun emplacement, surrounded by American, Japanese and Vietnamese journalists, and casually directed to sit at the helm of the weapon.” Songs were sung and Fonda, “exhausted by the manic pace of her tour, clasped her hands together and thanked her hosts. A photograph from this encounter became the focal point of Godard’s 1972 short film titled *Letter to Jane*, a footnote to *Tout Va Bien*.”

What interests Porter here is the legacy of the photographic image, and its capacity to remain a lightning rod and justification — so many years later — to ad hominem vitriol and political propagandising. He is also aghast that at least one leading critic has described these images as “appropriated”, when they so patently and deliberately declare themselves otherwise.

It’s at least one of Porter’s stated aims in this series to make “each photograph do just one thing — to reference just one event”. But what the Fonda re-staging pictures demonstrate is how rarely an image can ever be of just the thing that it is; how every image — wanted or not — is encoded with the halo-ing effect of earlier images.

The pictures of tropical forests — *Valley*, 2011; *Canopy*, 2011 — requires altogether more insider knowledge — at least a Level 2. These jungle landscapes are taken on the Hawaiian Island of Kauai (whose heritage the 2011 Clooney movie, *The Descendants*, brought to wider attention). In this context, we’re told the island “has a long history as a location for Hollywood war movies because of the aesthetic approximation of its jungle foliage to Southeast Asia and the Pacific Theater. In recent decades, however, the film industry has largely moved on to more arid climates to address more contemporary conflicts.”

In Los Angeles, Kauai provided a convenient stand-in for Vietnam and Korea, but in Porter’s mind, it’s become a stand-in for John Wayne himself. The original show card to *Pale Subtropical Light* contains a “Possible Letter from John Wayne to Jane Fonda”. It begins:

“Dear Jane Fonda

Hello — This is John Wayne, the famous actor who appeared with your father in the film Fort Apache.”

He goes on to say:

“Essentially my political affiliations serve to reinforce the archetype I embody for the movie-going populace. For them, the two roles I play — on screen and in life — are inseparable.”

Of course this is a spoof, written by Porter’s friend Ivan Svenonius, but it’s a humorous way of reminding us not only of the peculiar ways we allow ourselves to read and conflate the “image” with “reality”, but also an opportunity for Porter to have a private poke at Wayne, and his contorted over-justification for jumping the draft.

With these themes in mind, the titling of *Last Stand Hill*, 2012, is a bit of a give away. We can be reasonably sure these landscapes of a rising hillside are of General Custer’s last stand against the Sioux in the Battle of Little Bighorn. Porter is showing us the view as Custer would have seen it — outnumbered and seeking to get to the high ground for military advantage. Porter adds: “What was revealed

at the top of Last Stand Hill was the vertiginous optical sensation of endless, undulating green hills. Clearly, the preferable perspective on that day was from the denser foliage of the valley below.” Whilst the image, like most of the battlegrounds of history, can give no sense of “being there” on the day, it’s the sort of observation of particular appeal to a photographer — interested in perspective and the trick of light — and the significant ironies from being able to trust, or not, what one sees.

And whilst there’s a link between Custer’s hillside and the collage images in the series, it’s a Level 4 to work out all the layers (*Von Sternberg House #1*, 2011; *Von Sternberg House #2*, 2012). The house is a Richard Neutra beauty, built originally for that most Teutonic of legendary Hollywood directors, Josef von Sternberg, later owned by Ayn Rand, the darling of the Libertarian right, and therein photographed by the great architectural photographer, Julius Shulman in 1947. The connection to Little Bighorn? The grasses and plants — which were picked there, then overlaid onto scanned, cropped and re-photographed images of the originals.

What of the bees? The empty nests, arranged in the classical still life idiom, are literal “*natures morte*” — complete with shells and glazed apples. They are the empty husks of hornets’ nests — not the endangered honey bees — but they still stand (alongside *Falcon Apocalypse*, and its nod to the *Mad Max* genre) in Porter’s image system for exactly that — the collapse of a dead world, an apocalypse — a harbinger perhaps.

Matthew Porter is transparent about the connective tissue that links the disparate images, yet welcomes the idea this series could pass for a group show. He sees the Fondas as portraits, the forests as landscape, the bees as still-life, the Neutras as collage. Yet for all their generic and stylistic variations, the images uniformly demonstrate what Porter calls his “finish fetish”. “I could have plastered the walls with cheap inkjet prints and made the same statements and perhaps the conversation would be different. But I’m not willing to deny the pleasure of presentation. I know I’m filling the world with more objects but it is intended to be an exhibition. Picture and frame and a white box — the genre hasn’t been exhausted yet. I’m glad we went through a period of upheaval, but I’m on the other side. I’m trying to present the work without trying to undermine it with that self-consciousness.”

As Christopher Isherwood put it, “Los Angeles is a town which is like an advertisement for itself.” But *Pale Subtropical Light* is not an advertisement for Los Angeles. It’s a body of work which is knowing, but not self-conscious. It’s an indisputably conceptual series that is unashamedly aesthetically appealing. It’s a work that is knowing about its own effect.

SOPHIE BALHETCHET