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VICE

Photographer Whitney Hubbs's Genre-Busting Images of the Female Form

By Matthew Leifheit
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Los Angeles–based photographer Whitney Hubbs's new exhibition, *Body Doubles*, which opens Saturday at one of the city's eminent contemporary photography galleries, M+B, takes on the age-old form of the female nude. Asked why she wanted to take pictures of nude women, Hubbs answers emphatically, "Because it's so wrong! Because you can't do it! Because it's a cliché, because it's politically incorrect."

This kind of attitude is apparent throughout the photographs in the show, where skin tones are rendered in grainy greenish hues; blemishes, cuts, saggy bits, and other imperfections of skin are highlighted or even emphasized. Although Hubbs doesn't strive for the kind of perfection a fashion photographer might, the pictures are beautiful in the way David Lynch's films are beautiful. There is a clash in these pictures between the imperfections of the bodies, of the poses, of the way the photographs are made, and the formal perfection of the compositions.



Woman no. 8, 2016.

All photos © Whitney Hubbs, Courtesy M+B Gallery, Los Angeles

Although the photographs are anti-fashion in this sense, they are also working against the kind of idealized pictures men have been taking of women forever. Hubbs frames this work to some extent as a reaction to artists like the late California photographer Edward Weston, famous for sumptuous black-and-white pics of his wife Charis Wilson in the buff. But you can also see references further back in art history, to the early color photography of Paul Outerbridge and other depictions of the female form going back to antiquity. One photograph, titled *Woman no. 2*, shows the truncated torso of a woman bursting forward from behind a red drape. It reminds me of the famous *Winged Nike of Samothrace*, now housed at the Louvre museum, but Hubbs's Nike has a nipple piercing.

Hubbs clearly takes great pleasure in looking at the female body, but has always been very conscious of the risk of objectifying women. For this reason, she started the process of making this body of work by taking self-portraits, putting her own image on the line. It was around that time I first visited her studio and became excited about her work. Last week in LA, I met with Hubbs over burgers to ask her some questions about the progression of her thinking since then that led her to create *Body Doubles*.

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Whitney Hubbs, Woman no. 2, 2016

VICE: How did you come to do this work?

Whitney Hubbs: I took self-portraits a couple years ago, but it wasn't fun, it wasn't fulfilling.

I really liked them. But it wasn't enjoyable?

It wasn't enjoyable because I wasn't physically taking the picture. I get so much pleasure out of taking pictures. Ever since I was in the ninth grade, which is when I took my first photograph almost 25 years ago, I've been looking at Edward Weston and all those dudes that haven't taken pictures of women. It's been ingrained in me. When I started doing self-portraits there was no pleasure in looking. So I started bringing women into my studio to pose the way I would want to pose. I found women that I had an emotional connection with or a physical connection with, or both, so they could be sort of stand-ins for me.

You wanted them to act as figures in a composition rather than portraits of people.

Yeah, yeah. That's why you never see their faces. I don't want it to be about who the person is, I want it to be about the gesture and the body.

I notice they don't have names, they are titled Woman 1, Woman 2... I wonder also if there is some connection to the de Kooning paintings with those titles.

Yes. I was talking to a friend about the titles, and he reminded me of that.

It also seems like those were some angry paintings of women. Whereas in your pictures, although the women are anonymous, I think they're not treated violently in any way, even though you don't see the faces and certain things are cut off.

I feel like there is subtle dismemberment, but it's a collaborative process in many ways. I don't plan anything out before a shoot, but I do have some idea of what I want. I was trained in the tradition of documentary photography, where I studied with Jim Goldberg and Larry Sultan.

I was taught to be on the prowl, and to shoot a hundred rolls of film, and learn your camera really well. So if you see a shot, and it's the "decisive moment," you can capture it. So I bring that into the studio, where I don't have anything really planned. I like moving around the subject, and loosening up. I'll watch them do something, and ask them to do it again, or hold the same gesture.



Whitney Hubbs, Woman no. 5, 2016

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The way these pictures look is different than many of the color pictures you see now, it's maybe a little less naturalistic, or doesn't have that sharpness and feeling of reality that digital photography creates.

Yeah, that's what I don't like, that's why I stopped shooting color and transitioned into making black-and-white fiber prints in grad school. I could bump up the contrast or lower the contrast, abstract it, make it more ambiguous and mysterious. So when I started doing these pictures, I wanted to take this ideas into color. In black and white, I would never use the full tonal range that's possible to get in the darkroom. So with the color, I decided that if I made it "incorrect," I would be excited to work in this.

Well, that also removes it one more step from reality. I guess also, removing the bodies from the identities of the people takes things further and further away from the facts of what exists in your studio or something.

Yeah, exactly.



Whitney Hubbs, Woman no. 1, 2016

Does that allow you to create something more psychological in a certain way? Or, what does that make room for?

It makes room for mistakes.

I guess it's like, sort of the errors or the artifacts that photography creates can be some kind of analogue to human nature or human imperfection or something like that.

Yes, imperfection. In one of the pictures, of a woman wearing blue tights, her skin is sagging because it is being twisted. I like those imperfections, which match the imperfections of the color in some way. I think a lot about performance artists of the 70s, like Ana Mendieta and Yvonne Rainer. There were mistakes in their performances because they're doing it live. I wanted to capture that sort of essence, to have it not be too perfect.

I remember looking at your website a while ago, and there were all these pictures of men.

Yeah, so many pictures of men! In grad school, and right out of grad school, I photographed men a lot. I guess I was interested in trying to figure men out. Men confuse me, but I am also so familiar with them. But I haven't been interested in photographing men in a long time. I find it uninteresting. There's this bravado performance thing they do in front of the camera. And there's no vulnerability involved. The way the women pose and perform in front of the camera with me is so much more interesting and challenging for me, it's so much more fun.

Body Doubles is open from March 19 to May 7 at LA's M+B gallery. More information can be found [here](#). See previous photos by Whitney Hubbs in our 2014 fiction issue.



Whitney Hubbs, Woman no. 7 and 12, 2016