Daniel Gordon

12.9 – 2.11.14

Shadows, Patterns, Pears

Cut and Paste

by Claire Barliant

She has mermaid hair. It shimmers and sparkles, a royal blue that radiates light and appears almost neon. The hair falls in waves around her face, and her eyes are staring at some distant point. Her look is not so much vacant as pensive. Her full lips are slightly parted, as though she were lost in thought, and had just remembered something important and needed to concentrate for a few minutes. One of her eyes is green, the other strikingly blue, both wreathed in thick black lashes, and her nose is gently freckled, which only adds to her allure, as does a beauty mark on the top right corner of her lip. What is she thinking of, this girl with the mermaid hair? Does she know how beautiful she is? I imagine us sitting across from one another on the subway in New York, me staring at her covertly, or trying to, from behind a book, and her looking off into space, unaware of her effect on everyone around her. When she exits the train, it's like someone dimmed the lights in the car. She took something with her but no one knows exactly what.

Thirty-nine years ago, in an essay titled *Photography, Vision, and Representation*, Joel Snyder and Neil Walsh Allen expressed disappointment in photography criticism, saying that most critics who write about photography often focus on the contrast between reality and artifice, or on the mechanics of a camera and how it is similar to the way that the human eye functions. Such comparisons, they note, often comment on the 'supposed resemblance of the human eye with its lens and its retina to the camera with its lens and film.' Bullshit, Synder and Walsh Allen respond (I paraphrase). A photograph cannot show us what we ourselves would have seen had we been standing in the same spot as the photographer. He then writes the following:

> A photograph shows us 'what we would have seen' at a certain moment in time, *from* a certain vantage point *if* we kept our head immobile *and* closed one eye *and if* we saw with the equivalent of a 150-mm or 24-mm lens *and if* we saw things in Agfacolor or in Tri-X developed in D-76 and printed on Kodabromide #3 paper. [1]

When I read this quote, I thought, "phew". What a relief, to be liberated from having to rehash the weary themes so often used to frame photographic work: that photographs frequently 'trick' us, and do not show us what is 'real.' Or that other chestnut: focusing on the process rather than the subject matter. That's why I open this essay with a formal analysis of sorts, a description of Gordon's *Portrait with Blue Hair*, 2013. It is refreshing to have a change of topic, to be able to talk about the subject, and how it makes me feel, rather than the fact that the image is composed of cutouts, fragments of images mostly found on the Internet, then expertly cobbled together by Gordon to make a sort of Mrs. Frankenstein, a three-dimensional collage that is dismantled after the picture has been taken. It seems to me that with most contemporary photography criticism there is little time spent on the actual experience of looking, on trying to articulate what a photograph does for the viewer, what sort

1   Joel Snyder and Neil Walsh Allen, *Photography, Vision, and Representation*, Critical Inquiry, Vol. 2, No. 1 (Autumn 1975): 152.

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of unexpected treasures it might hold. This is especially true for photographers like Gordon, who aren't making documentary or abstract photographs, but something different, something in its own category altogether, perhaps best called, for now, studio-based. What a relief not to have to talk about all that, because when I look at Gordon's most recent work, I have no desire to talk about photography at all: instead I want to talk about his work in relation to painting. Specifically modernist painting, and even more specifically Matisse (although Gordon's work also makes me think of Dadaist collage and photomontage by the likes of Hannah Höch or John Heartfield).

Matisse was no stranger to photography, and later in his career, in the thirties, he made a point of photographing his work while it was in progress. This was a defensive strategy: he had been criticized for making paintings that seemed facile, and wanted to prove the world that his process was time-consuming and tortured. In that he succeeded: an exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2012, *Matisse: In Search of True Painting*, exhibited his photographs alongside the finished work, and the results are startling. An Armenian photographer named Matossian took at least ten photographs of Matisse's *The Large Blue Dress* (1937) from February 26 through April 3, 1937. What you see is the gradual development from a composition that is fairly realistic and perspectively convincing, to one that is more quintessentially Matisse: flattened, with contrasting patterns, and bursting with color. Knowing that his progress was being documented may have liberated Matisse to take ever more daring risks–he could rework freely without fear of losing an earlier, more successful iteration. [2]

What does *The Large Blue Dress* have to do with *Portrait of Blue Hair*? Everything and nothing. It is interesting to see the evolution of *The Large Blue Dress*, and to contemplate each individual photograph (Matisse referred to them as 'states,' a term he borrowed from printmaking) as an artwork in its own right. Seen together, the group of Matisse's drafts and revisions gives one a feel for the arduous studio practice of painting, and the internal, creative, physical life of the studio is crucial to Gordon's work. In addition, he shares Matisse's affinity for color and pattern; the works in the book *Still Lifes, Portraits and Parts* are almost scandalously vibrant, pitting intricate and boldly hued prints against one another, and overlaying these dense eyefuls of a background with equally sensuous plants, vases, or fruit. His compositions have a foreshortened depth of field that also evokes Matisse's claustrophobic spaces. This is even more true in his most recent body of work, which collapses space and mashes patterns and colors together to electrifying effect. But Gordon's work is sculptural, dimensional, whereas Matisse is explicitly flat. Take *Still Life With Lobster*, from 2012, which looks like a Dutch still-life on acid, with a pile of lobsters at its center, some red, some an otherworldly blue or even gold, bracketed by a pea-green pitcher holding a bouquet of bright daisies and a black-and-white vase containing a spray of electric blue feathers. The luminous crustaceans tumble down a table covered with various textiles, landing near a cluster of lemons. It's clear on closer inspection that the lobsters are three-dimensional, as are the lemons, you can see the folds in the paper that reveal Gordon's hand in crafting these objects.

These imperfections are deliberate, they make it clear that this work is not trying to fool anyone's eye. Though Gordon's earlier work did play on the reality/artifice dichotomy; he became known for a series of images in which he appeared to be flying, body horizontally aloft several feet off the ground. In fact, these images were also, in a sense, 'true': he really was launching himself into the air, while a friend snapped the picture from afar, creating the illusion of flight. Now, in his current body of work, there is no

2   Rebecca Rabinow, *The Woman in Blue*, Matisse: In Search of True Painting (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2012), 146. '[I]t is likely that at certain points during the creation of The Large Blue Dress, the knowledge that the photographs existed was sufficient to provide [Matisse] with the sense of freedom necessary to wipe down areas of his canvas and rework them, without having to overanalyze his changes.'

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illusion. With the surfeit of images in today's world, there is no need for tricks, largely because they wouldn't fool anyone anyway: today we are all image-generators and consumers, all the time.

This last concept, one that underlies Gordon's work (MoMA curator Eva Respini talks about the artist's reliance on Google Image Search in her essay for the book *Still Lifes, Portraits and Parts*) might perhaps be best illustrated in a subset of images in the *Still Lifes* series that show the profile of a face and its shadow silhouetted against a surface in the background. These are the starkest of the photographs in this series and, in their exploitation of the play of light and shadow, offer an ephemeral moment that brings us firmly, resolutely back into the medium at hand: photography. The shadow flags the objects in the photographs as being three-dimensional; it helps us understand that there is a light source and that we are looking at a thing that existed in the world, rather than a photoshopped composition. (Respini calls his practice a kind of 'analog Photoshop.') The shadow presumably could also be manipulated, fake, but we know it is there—and this is where it is necessary to fall back on the usual tropes that make up photography criticism—because after all is said and done we still 'trust' photographs to show us the image as we would have seen it *if* we had been there, what we ourselves would have seen had we been standing in the same spot as the photographer. As I write this, I realize this

is what makes Gordon a photographer rather than a sculptor documenting his work with an 8 x 10 view camera (and why the history and theory of photography is so essential to evaluating and understanding it): that ultimately he believes in the strange metaphysical alchemy that still somehow occurs even after someone explains the mechanics of a 150-mm or 24-mm lens and Agfacolor or Tri-X developed in D-76 and Kodabromide #3 paper.

Foam presents the exhibition *Shadows, Patterns, Pears* by the American artist **Daniel Gordon** (b. 1980 Boston, USA). Gordon was chosen as the winner of the Foam Paul Huf Award 2014. This prize is organised by Foam and awarded annually to a young, promising international photographer under 35. The jury voted unanimously for Daniel Gordon whose work draws from the classical genres of still life and portraiture explored in the main movements of modern art. The exhibition features a selection of colorful portraits and still lifes, created and photographed between 2010 and 2014.

Claire Barliant is a freelance writer and independent curator who lives in Brooklyn, New York. She currently works as curatorial advisor to EFA Project Space, and her writing on art and architecture frequently appears in *Art in America* and *Icon: International Architecture, Design and Culture,* among other places.

This exhibition is made possible by JTI.

A *Portrait with Blue Hair,* 2013 © Daniel Gordon / Courtesy Wallspace New York

B *Still Life with Lobster,* 2012 © Daniel Gordon / Courtesy Wallspace New York

C *Crescent Eyed Portrait,* 2012 © Daniel Gordon / Courtesy Wallspace New York

D *No title 02, from Flying Pictures,* 2003 © Daniel Gordon / Courtesy Wallspace New York

E *No Title 01, from Flying Pictures,* 2003 © Daniel Gordon / Courtesy Wallspace New York

Backcover: *Spring Onions,* 2013 © Daniel Gordon / Courtesy Wallspace New York

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