

# M+B

## FRIEZE

### WHITNEY HUBBS' UNHOLY RITES FOR THE SPIRITUALLY BANKRUPT

Collected in a new volume, Hubbs's new photographs transform humiliation and degradation into pillars of personal power

By Chris Wiley  
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A couple of years ago, on the cusp of turning 40, Whitney Hubbs moved from her native Los Angeles to a remote corner of upstate New York, to take a teaching job. It was isolating. It was cold and foreign. The subjects of her previous work – brooding California landscapes in noirish chiaroscuro, psychosexual portraits of faceless female friends in washed-out 1970s colour-space – were suddenly unavailable. These new limitations led to a revelation: her true subject matter had always been herself, but she had been veiling it with proxies and metaphor. So, she turned her camera on herself. The resulting work is raging, funny, brutal, raw; it was a quantum leap in her practice. In front of the camera's unblinking eye, Hubbs faced down her demons and laid bare her hidden desires, transmuting humiliation and degradation into pillars of personal power, as if by some unholy rite.

The pictures – a collection of which have just been published, alongside an essay by Chris Kraus, in a handsome volume titled *Say So* (2021) by Self Publish Be Happy – could be superficially described as sadomasochistic erotica, since they feature Hubbs in a variety of compromising positions (bound and gagged, piss-covered, breasts plastered with glistening blobs of pink chewing gum) and in various states of undress. But classing the work as this would do it a disservice. When we plumb their depths, these pictures reveal themselves as being less about titillation and more about universal, close-to-the-bone emotional struggles, and Hubbs's attempt to overcome them.

'I was spiritually bankrupt,' Hubbs told me when I asked what spurred her to make these images. 'This entire project was about taking agency over so many aspects of my own life,' she continued. 'As I've gotten older, I put up with less bullshit, so I wanted to be as direct as possible in these works.' She has certainly achieved her aim. Francesca Woodman is a tempting historical touchstone, particularly in works such as *Untitled* (1976), for which she festooned her nude torso with an assortment of clothespins, or *Self Portrait, Providence (Nude with Glass)* (1976), in which she presses two pieces of glass against her naked breasts and stomach, squashing and distorting them. But the comparison doesn't quite fit: Woodman's works appear enthralled with the dusty,



Whitney Hubbs, *Untitled*, from the series 'Say So', 2019–2020.

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gothic patina of their own sadness. Hubbs, you get the sense, wants out, struggling angrily against her issues. This lashing out feels punk and, like punk itself, prototypically macho. Unsurprising, then, that Hubbs was something of a punk herself in her youth and that among the artists she cites as her 'competition' (she doesn't use a gentle word like 'inspiration') are California *enfants terribles* Mike Kelley and Paul McCarthy, and that grimy poet of Russian dissolution, the photographer Boris Mikhailov.



Whitney Hubbs, *Untitled*, from the series 'Say So', 2019–2020.

Despite this desire to joust with the bad boys, Hubbs's project is also inescapably bound to traditional notions of femininity. Women in their 40s, Hubbs lamented when we spoke, are often still expected – and not so politely – to fade their bodies and desires into the background and take up the mantle of either saintly mother or pitiable spinster. (Unless, like rule-proving exceptions such as Jennifer Lopez, they find ways to look forever young, through some miracle of genetics or the deft application of a surgeon's knife.) Hubbs flips an emphatic middle finger at all this: she is unabashed in flaunting and debasing her not-so-young flesh, though this should not be taken to mean that she is totally unafraid. Fear, in fact, proved to be a great motivator. She told me her response to the first photo shoot she did for this series was: 'Oooh, these kind of scare me. I should keep taking them.' And, of course, she was right. Running face-first into your fear is one of the most vitalizing forces in art-making: it's rocket fuel to escape the gravitational pull of by-the-numbers pablum.

Let's be clear, though: facing-down fear might generate good art, but it does not guarantee triumph over it. Hubbs's work does not travel an inexorable arc toward redemption. Quite the opposite, in fact. She insists that her photographs are about failure, and not in the trendy 'fail upwards' kind of way. 'It's just that kind of failure of getting older', she told me, 'and things not working out the way you wanted them to.' We get older, our bodies break down, we disappoint ourselves, we disappoint others. Nothing's perfect, but we feel like maybe it should be. This is the most fundamental kind of bondage: we are all tied forever to our own lives. Perhaps at the root of the masochistic fetish itself is the desire to alchemize the pain of our sorry fates into pleasure through perverse play-acting. Hubbs tells me that she found making these images cathartic, which is a kind of pleasure. Immerse yourself in her work long enough, though, and you can tell that her greatest delectation comes from rage.