

*Ariane Lopez-Huici: Two or Three Things We Know About Her*

She is a photographer

She is not afraid of flesh

She is not in love with pure form.

Nor with impure form, for she does not believe in simple dichotomies. We know this about her because her photographs are alive with complex dichotomies—nude versus naked, for example. In our culture, the naked are those who appear before us undressed. Those who are nude are also undressed. Yet they are clothed in an ideal. As easy as it is to see what the nude and the naked share, it is difficult to see what differentiates them—what sets them so thoroughly at odds with one another that they form a dichotomy. Moreover, it is not certain that the dichotomy turns on anything visible. Nonetheless, Lopez-Huici's photographs picture it—not the opposition of the real and the ideal, but the way this opposition illuminates bodies it cannot shape.

In her pictures of very large women—immensely opulent women—Lopez-Huici brings the lush and dimpled particularity of their flesh into sharp focus. This is a new subject for art. One thinks of Rubens, only to remember that his women may count as fat, some of them, but their flesh is that of the ideal. Rubensian bodies only pretend to be palpable. Lopez-Huici's women need no such pretense. Extravagantly present to us and to themselves, they present us with flesh obliged to maintain a kind of truce with gravity. Of course we all feel the weight of our bodies, on occasion. The women in Lopez-Huici's photographs feel it always and thus, one imagines, differently—less as a physical weight than as a temporal reminder. One is embodied, at every moment and utterly. That Lopez-Huici, who is slim, has made such precise images of such monumental embodiments tells us more about her.

She is vividly alive to others.

She inspires others to come alive to her.

She is willing to be amazed.

Nor does she doubt our willingness to join her in her amazement at the spectacle of women who not only defy the ideals of female beauty but also revel in their defiance. She is so confident that she goes out of her way to give us every chance to misunderstand her, and to misunderstand her subjects, as well. With *Rebelles*, for example—her astonishing tableaux of sitting, standing, and reclining women—she recalls the inhabitants of the harem in Ingres's *Turkish Bath*. She invokes art-historical phantoms that will, if we let them, lead us far from the real and deep into the realm of the ideal—that will induce us to forget what we know about bodies and time and mortality. To give in to this temptation would be easy for some of us, difficult for others. It depends on the degree of one's need for the familiar reassurances of art. The art of Lopez-Huici reassures us that we don't need those reassurances. We need unfamiliar ones.

We need, that is, her documentary accuracy about pendulous breasts and creased thighs and vast, sagging bellies. And we need her courageous refusal to offer her accuracy as sufficient in itself. She has no use for the documentary alibi, which too often stultifies whatever it justifies. Lopez-Huici's records of fact are inventions—or, if you like, fictions. For her “Rebels” and variously configured couples are not merely themselves. Under her guidance, they play certain roles. Acquiring theatrical intensity, they become imaginary—even as they insist on their recognizability, as images migrating from one photograph to the next and as people who exist outside the boundaries of Lopez-Huici's oeuvre. Thus they confront us with the complexity of art, seductive and inexhaustible.

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