

Ariane Lopez-Huici: Photography, at New York Studio School

December 6, 2007 to February 2, 2008

By JOE FYFE



Ariane Lopez-Huici *Triumph, Paris 2007*

The majority of the black and white photographs in Ariane Lopez-Huici's exhibition at the New York Studio School are of a group of four unclothed, uncommonly large women. Perhaps more accurately, they are uncommonly large women in relation to most photographs of unclothed women. They are not uncommon among women in the world.

As Lopez-Huici photographs them, they are in the picture of health, proud, and comfortable. Their substantial forms seem to open and feed on the light of the photography studio, as they emerge from the surrounding darkness in the images.

It took several years to establishing a rapport between the photographer and her models, and there is even humor in some of the pictures: one, titled "Triumph" has the four women joining hands with their arms raised in apotheosis as their bulky upper arms, breasts, stomachs and thighs fold over each other and collect in the frame like luminous sculpture.

As a group, the pictures also summon up more ancient associations. They offer a counterclaim to other allusions to the Venus of Willendorf (Austria, 30,000 B.C.E.) in contemporary art. This tiny statue, with its mute pendant head and protruding belly, breasts and thighs, is thought to be a fertility deity. The sculpture plays a significant role in the quite brilliant opening chapter of Camille Paglia's (probably deservedly maligned) book, "Sexual Personae".

Paglia describes this figurine as containing women's essential power: that of the dark, primitive mysterious forces of procreation and destruction, of instinct and blood, rooted in the earth. Paglia says, "She is the too-muchness of nature... She is remote as she kills and creates. She is the cloud of archaic night."

Stubby, oversized confederates of the Venus of Willendorf are a staple of Jeff Koons production; she is embodied in the early Vacuum Cleaners, in the Rabbit, and the Puppy, among other works. By utilizing this sign, Koons argues that commercial culture furnishes society with primordial energy in order that it may be psychically healed.

Helmut Newton, particularly in his "Large Nudes" and more recently Vanessa Beecroft, both attempt to wed the Venus of Willendorf's mysterious silence and forbidding sexual aura to another aspect of commercial culture, the hauteur of the fashion model. In all of these cases, their fallacy is in the artists' re-investment in the myth.

Lopez-Huici, then, acknowledges the mythic power of the Venus of Willendorf, that of the earth mother and other myths of femininity as she de-mystifies them through her subjects' specificity and ambient humanity. She prefers the primacy of the natural world to the world of signs. When seen in relation to the photographs of Lopez-Huici, the work of the other artists mentioned here seem rather coy.

A version of this review was first published by Gay City News, New York, January 17, 2008

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