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Lavished in Kindness: Ariane Lopez-Huici Photographs Priscille

by Edmund White

Ariane Lopez-Huici: PRISCILLE at Hionas Gallery

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124 Forsyth Street

New York City, (646) 559-5906



Ariane Lopez-Huici, Priscille, 2009. Silver gelatin print, 20 x 24 inches. Courtesy of Hionas Gallery

The tiny, birdlike French photographer Ariane Lopez-Huici is always drawn to marginal human subjects—amazingly obese women, a mother-son nude couple, a dancer on crutches. Now, in a one-woman show of black-and-white photographs at Hionas Gallery she has turned to Priscille, a beautiful blonde French model who threw herself under a subway in an attempt to commit suicide and emerged without her limbs. Priscille's father has disowned her for destroying the body "he gave her," but she soldiers on. She is even pregnant now and is amazed to think she will give birth to a creature with all its limbs.

Lopez-Huici is the opposite of, say, a Diane Arbus. She is not picturing freaks in their eccentric habitats and exaggerating their peculiarities but rather placing her odd subjects outside time and place in a noble, seamless black setting, often lit beautifully. She has found the Venus of Willendorf in her obese women, turned them into fertility goddesses, and she has discovered what is demure or seductive in Priscille. Many male viewers are disturbed to discover they are turned on by her mutilated body. If she is mutilated, she is no more so than the fragments of ancient classical sculpture we know so well and admire.

From an ethical point of view it is important to remark that Priscille sought out Lopez-Huici and was disappointed that she did not photograph her right away. Because of Lopez-Huici's previous work, which has been widely shown (including in a big museum show in Spain), Priscille contacted her. We are so used to privileged, intact photographers stealing the souls of the unfortunate, it's crucial to underline that Lopez-Huici offers her people sympathy and respect. She makes the mutilated whole.

Her affection recalls that of George Dureau, the New Orleans photographer, who pictured his limbless and homeless subjects, sometimes propelling themselves about on a skateboard, in heroic, tenderly lit poses. Dureau's extremely original work of the 1970s inspired Robert Mapplethorpe, who himself often found the humanity in his sado-masochistic subjects.

But Lopez-Huici photographs mostly women, bathes them in a charisma of light, banishes any lingering sense of shame and discovers, for instance, what a different culture or epoch might have admired in female obesity. Priscille posed for Lopez-Huici over several years and we can see her gradually relaxing and becoming more secure and, finally,



Ariane Lopez-Huici, Priscille, 2009. Silver gelatin print, 20 x 24 inches. Courtesy of Hionas Gallery



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confronting the camera directly if timidly when her pregnancy has become evident.

It is a curiosity of photography as an art that it deals with both subjectivity and objectivity. The model is called “the subject,” though he or she is what is looked at through the *objectif*, the French word for “lens.” In the early days of political correctness, critics used to complain that photographers were “objectifying” their subjects; I remember Mapplethorpe especially was attacked for objectifying black men. But the very nature of photographing is objectifying; I can’t think how a photographer could avoid it, unless the model took a simultaneous picture of the artist, or unless the model appended, say, a long written response to the picture.

If sympathy and obvious respect and affection count for something, however, Lopez-Huici can be said to eschew exploitation, lavishing Priscille in abundant aesthetic kindness.

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