

by ABIGAIL CHILD

*Writing and film—how they relate, translate, share methodologies, perceptual acuities—converge in this essay of the late eighties where I write “off” still photographs, mostly from my films “Perils” (1986) and “Mayhem” (1987) that figure as two parts to the “Black and White Trilogy” at the center of Is “This What You Were Born For?” The series of seven 16mm films concerns itself with gender and genre, and in the Trilogy (which includes “Covert Action,” 1984) directly addresses and utilizes narrative syntax and subjects. The “stars” of the films include downtown divas Ela Troyano and Diane Torr, as well as other performers on the scene who could be roped into participating. Sade, Mexican soap opera sound tracks, and photos from silent movies are some of the choreographic source material. Writing while examining the “stills” from these movies, in turn, created a detached descriptive state in which, among other things, posture is semantic. The result is a reflection on process, construction, illusion, gender, and spectacle.*

*from A MOTIVE FOR MAYHEM*

She's looking out of the picture. The bars across her face hold her in the picture and hold her from us.

The next is a negative. There's a pause in her lifted left shoulder. She's about to say something, and he's listening, but his attention is in the other direction. There's another person in this room. We can't see them.

Now it's later and we're up closer. There's a sense of action in the angle of her head, her sharp chin. Her collar is rolled, which both covers and seduces.

He's twirling something. Behind him are two maids. That's the second thing you notice. Imperial twins against a backdrop of altar. The altar is this stage, the curtain: the space of strangeness. The dots on the curtain and the patterns of the cans (stacked) mime the whirling flags he circles. The maids wear aprons,

are icons of discomfort. The magician needs aprons on bodies behind him to underline his possession: these are his maids (not apprentices). The maid on the left is relaxed. She won't go "on" until later. The second bends forward to see what is happening. The two women are the backgrounds to his repeated circling. In the background, they are the repeating figure.

Here is another. She is on her knees between chair and umbrella. The field is interior. The body is waiting. She looks up, seductive and luscious. She's arrogant. Her breast is big. It's a perfect volcano. In an encased waist, glitter to point with just a hint of fat pout.

The light makes her dangerous.

The onslaught of someone else. A big back in front of us. A dead body. A big cop cap. These are the business dead. You can tell by the brims of their suits and their posture. One's got his hand in his pocket. The women are screaming. The light makes them desperate.

Significantly earlier, pictures are taken. It's poses happening. It's a stage, a stage against a wall in the outdoors. We identify with the one being kissed and, as well, with the camera. We are both subject and object. We're the movement between the subject and object. We become the subject and we can also become the object. We can tell. No. This picture is about us as subject. But we have not yet been forced to see that the subject might become the object. This is because there are no eyes looking at us.

In the next picture, everything changes. The flesh has been used. The brow is tense and along the nose is a wary ennui (a weary abrasion). He is looking out from under. Everything is covered. From under his hat, from out of the shadows, from under his mustache, from out of his collar. His ears are flat. Their color is silvered. The skin is lived. Like a tree, he's been there. His hat

could be a priest's hat but you know it is not. It is a worker's hat. The lips are firm. The frame is tight. The person is deep inside himself. He is close up, he is on the surface, but there remain his unassimilated parts.

*It's the surface and the unassimilated parts that give us a grasp of the world. They provide the stage for our imagination and what the author can do with absolutely ordinary people.*

This is not really comfortable. It does not climax. Everything is off-balance. The wall is tilted; the hair hangs weirdly, the legs are not at ease. One eye looks out, one looks off. Nothing has connection. On second look: though their bodies are entwined, his hand on her leg, her arms around his neck, they are falling off each other in perpetual stasis.

This is just the beginning. The moment says stop but is not going to make it. I'm moving faster. There's a sense of humor with all this action and nothing happening. There are also holes in the wall. They tell everything.

Here is another. She is reflection. She is texture and seduction and she's lying under the light. She's the point of focus. And yes, she's unclothed. She's holding a drink, inviting you in. She's holding a drink, and the bit of cloth draped across her loin looks like water, a waterfall. Her breasts hang down. There's all this darkness. She is so actually distant. She just moved in with my action. But really, she is so distant. She's more like the door. She's double-handled. It's a double-handled door. It's a door, which leads you on. There's a light under this door, luring you in, up to the window: her stage. This is the stage of the still life. We try to move away our eyes. But the folds, all the imperfections, the shadows force, focus us back onto the figure. You attend. She waits. You look. She eludes you. You wait.

You pick up the original. This is the hubris of definition. You fall. This maneuver introduces clarity. You foreground the exception and the threshold,

deflect the mean, redefine the motive, reread the need for causality. In the largest sense this means we shape our causes, we expect them and then reshape them.

I begin my pictures under the effect of shock. In a picture, it should be possible to discover new things every time you see it.

For me, a picture should be like sparks.

A modeled form is less striking than one which is not. Modeling prevents shock and limits movement of the visual depth. Without modeling, depth is limitless. Movement can stretch to infinity.

Our age is distinguished by its distortions.  
Our visions are fulfillment of our needs.

I had long conceived of a film composed only of reaction shots in which all causality was erased. The isolation and dramatization of emotions through the isolation (camera) and dramatization (editing) of gesture. What would be left would be the resonant voluptuous suggestions of history and the human face.

Some of my love for found materials must in part lie with this sense: of the value of the half-formed, the incomplete. An artist who seeks a classic unit, a formed whole, a balanced vision, or harmonious work is looking for a different landscape. My topography demands negative capability.

As clear as I can see it. Rough and expansive, wet and dry, angles irritation cogs smooth-running fondnesses mixed, not anything, but everything and silence. Held together by the wires of its exhilaration. Raining art out of cross-purpose. Living off tension squirming to earth, re-exposing shock and the mind at its metaphorical limit. The mind itself is a network of channels. The mind is shocked and flooded. There are no borders in the mind

A backbrace of pileups. All our needs are perjured.

This manipulation tries to hide itself, so the spectator sees only the arranged reality. Explosive force is attractive as a means to escape the arrangement. It arranges its escape. It deforms the attraction. This form reordered rereads the audience. The audience knows the language, recognizes its disorder and denotations. Is not really comfortable. What is two is one and one also. What is separate is lost and immanent. There's the tension and impossibility of fact. It's all surplus.

This is how generation works. The edge moves out from the center. The spaces get occupied. The not-previous becomes present, is named, to eat away the boundaries of the art. What type of sentences move through this space? The sentences are true when true spaces move through it. If there is enough of the world in the work, it is a world, and if not, you add more.

To get that envelope of sound. They would hit the spots, and I was interested in where they were mobbing. The exciting drama in the meeting between ambivalent shapes. Sexuality evoked as a line against which the body can move.

Against sad mechanics of distribution and an economics of production held by a nostalgic politics, in obeisance to the observant authority. Misappropriate this moment. Demand its emergence, blunder, unbounded. Will you to it. Exterior anomaly equals organic splice. This is not comfortable.

The meat of any image is the suggestive material that circles the edge of the body running on a tangent to it.