Ciel variable


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Jennifer Long

Doubt
La Centrale Galerie Powerhouse, Montreal
20 January – 26 February 2006

The nine medium-scale colour photographs of women in this exhibition are akin to a searchlight focused on a troubling affliction of the heart that few today have not experienced at first hand: lover’s doubt. The images are powerfully interrogatory, offering an up-close and personal purview of states of love and the associated skepticism that breeds monsters of suspicion and uncertainty in the psyche.

These crisp and deftly cropped images of women are hauntingly confrontational. Whether the faces squarely meet our gaze – or, rather, look straight through us – or the heads are turned away from us, all the images are themselves consummately difficult for us to turn away from. Why? Perhaps because the images together as an installation constitute a highly believable and unsettling portraiture of sorrow, while at the same time invoking inquest philosophical questions about the condition of amore and the skepticism that it can stir in the staunchest of human hearts.

Toronto-based artist Jennifer Long has long explored states of selfhood in the women whom she has photographed for many years. In the series of aluminium-mounted chromogenic prints in this exhibition, she is attuned – as she has been in related bodies of work, such as Bedded (2001) and Undressed (2003) – to tremulous private moments in which a touch can convey far more than words ever could. Her choices of imagery, from the consummately sad expression on a woman’s face cropped tight to its contours to a head caught next to an empty pillow, make for unerring eloquence in the sighting – and genuine epiphanies in the seeing.

In the series Doubt (2002), Long once again focuses upon and magnifies the psychological tumult associated with love in the women she has photographed. Three of the works exhibited feature the faces of individual women lying in bed, with tears in their eyes, but viewed head-on in a vertical format, as though naturalistically posed (the lateral tear from an eye duct is a most surreal punctum here, and more moving, besides); the other photographs are profile close-ups of her subjects’ necks resting on pillows. They could, of course, all be interpreted as surrogate self-portraits of Long herself. She demonstrates that love is a remarkably complex term – and doubt, in the context of loving a significant other, more complex still.

Over the last several years, this gifted photographer and curator has cast an intensely personal optic upon intimate relationships. Nothing is wasted, incidental, or trifling in her images, which always steer clear of anything harrow or willfully histrionic, thus bolstering a prevailing sense of authenticity. Further, the images are cropped in such a way that we achieve an intimacy of regard with the subjects and recognize that they possess, in the midst of their doubt, a wrenching and clear of anything baroque or wilfully histrionic, thus bolstering a pre­vailing sense of authenticity. Further, the images are cropped in such a way that we achieve an intimacy of regard with the subjects and recognize that they possess, in the midst of their doubt, a wrenching and

She seeks not to trap her subjects in masques of frozen interpretation, but to touch on the deepest pulse of their sorrow and uncertainty. She undermines the truism that is the idealistic understanding of love, demonstrating that it is really a highly complex and layered phenomenon that can and does wreak havoc in the emotional brain.

Long has said, “As I enter my late twenties, I have become intrigued by the doubt involved with falling and being in love... There seems to be a common faltering, an unspoken hesitation regarding commitment and relationships.” She stakes the very contemporary thin ice of relationships in search of the truth. But she avers that there are no final truths about love – well, no universal truths, anyway. She captures in her lens the pungent data that her subjects broadcast from their inner worlds, the sadness and doubt that crop up when one questions the veracity of love, the necessity of and for lacrymae. These telling integers of the emotional mind confront the viewer from the walls of La Centrale like hungry ghosts sharing a singular infertility: love-stricken doubt.

Long’s eloquent and moving take on the insufficiency of love and subsequent “realm of doubt” has an intuitive truthfulness about it that we equate with rare authenticity. In her ongoing search for dialogue, she has proven herself a worthy student of Mikhail Bakhtin. She makes us, her viewers, dialogical partners and asks that we bring our own experiences to the work and install a personal narrative there.

In this remarkable body of work, Long calls into question the poetic construct of romantic love, showing us images of consummately vulnerable women whose own love stories are impoverished by doubt. She highlights the vulnerability of her subjects by photographing them without clothing, thus highlighting the primordial vulnerability and sociality of the flesh. But this only accentuates the innate nobility of her subjects.

The exhibition is far more than a sequence of discrete photographs. It verges on environmental volume. The longer we linger, the more susceptible we become to the pull of sorrow, the tug of doubt. Doubt is intended for and will certainly attract a wide audience, including ordinary folk, photographic historians, psychoanalysts and philosophers, for its head-on confrontation with doubling Thomasina’s has universal appeal.

James D. Campbell

James D. Campbell is a writer on art and an independent curator based in Montreal. He is the author of over a hundred books and catalogues on art and artists.