Reflections on Peggy

Gallery John A. Schweitzer, Montreal. September 19 to October 6, 1991

Melanie Reinblatt
Photography

REFLECTIONS ON PEGGY JARREL KAPLAN

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Wether Peggy Jarrel Kaplan is a photographer who fastens her vision to the study of people, or a portraitist who has chosen the medium of photography as most suited to her purposes, or both, are questions worthy of consideration. Both roles, for Kaplan, serve not only as revelatory mechanisms but inherently carry within them their own aesthetic proposals and solutions.

Her portraits are all of artists; in her most recent exhibition at Galerie John A. Schweitzer, choreographers of the international avant-garde arts community predominate. Also included are portraits of Brodsky, Utkin and Ilya Kabakov, three pivotal figures in the second wave of contemporary Russian visual artists. The passive/active presence of the artist as subject gives greater dimensionality to the original configuration, which is at once inspired in its vision and confident in its method.

In a recent guest-curated exhibition at the Louvre, Jacques Derrida hypothesises about self-portraiture and drawing. He explains that during the act of drawing the artist “has seen” and “will see” but presently does not see. He refers to the difference between the thing drawn and the drawn line or drawing. Portraiture is compromised by the “apperception of the graphic art” or the process of drawing.

If Kaplan chooses photography over drawing, she circumvents this obstacle of process, yet photography comes with its own attendant indeterminacies. She handles all decisively and characteristically.

Diane Arbus claims of photography that “the more it tells you, the less you know”. Kaplan effortlessly accepts the inevitability of this cardinal law and is consciously discriminatory in what she attempts to achieve and the means she uses to achieve it. She approaches her craft with an almost classic economy of means. The usual dependence on contextual and physiognomic signs is diminished.

Facial expression and pose are not formal concerns, and an overall calm prevails. Sometimes a hand will be used gesturally, or a personally significant object in-
eluded. The anecdotal is kept to a minimum. A soft
diffused natural light is preferred to the expressive
scope of chiaroscuro. This austerity, this paring down,
gives us less information about the drama of character;
at the same time it leads us to the first intimations of the
transcendent nature of the work.

Two mechanisms she does allow herself are the
static frontal head and shoulder and the dark backdrop,
which creates an evocative figure and ground.

Richard Avedon’s statement, “There is no such
thing as inaccuracy in a photograph. All photographs
are accurate. None of them is the truth”, is only indirectly
addressed in Kaplans work. Kaplan’s accuracy and truth
are defined by her singular purpose; the inspiration that
resides within the artist, the alluding to this symbolic
status of his own œuvre.

Derrida has also conjectured about the meta­
phorical link of self-portraiture and blindness, which
leads to an impossible reflexivity: “Put simply, it is
necessary to know, to see clearly that the performative
fiction that involves the spectator in the work’s signa­
ture can be viewed only through the blindness it produces
as truth. Even if we were certain that (the artist) was
drawing himself drawing himself, we can never know
solely by looking at the work if he is depicting himself
drawing or drawing something else - or even himself as
something else.”

Inasmuch as it would be assumed that the self­
portrait would most closely approach the locus of the
creative spirit, we are often left with only a dizzying
mirroring. The division of labour, into subject and
object, photographer and sitter, absolves the image of a
taint of self-surveillance. Each may enter a symbiotic, if
not sympathetic, relationship. Often this relationship
becomes antagonistic when interpretations and expecta­
tions are imposed by subject/photographer and suffered
by object/sitter. The junction becomes either a place of
dull ambiguity or a battleground of human will against
imagination.

Kaplan uses great discretion in approaching her
subject, as Jean-Marc Adolphe relates in his foreword to
a collection of Kaplan prints, “At the death of Kideyuki
Yano, an influential Japanese choreographer, Daniel
Dobbells recollects one of his favourite exercises, ‘To
move and speak with one’s face hidden behind a dark
and very thin veil without allowing one’s breath to
disturb the neutrality and stillness of the cloth.” In
looking at the portraits of choreographers of Peggy
Jarrell Kaplan, one can feel that same quality of barely
touching.”

Subject and object, both artists, have the same
function and operate reciprocally. Kaplan is deferential
to her objects and in turn the objects (the photographed
artists) exude a lucid passivity.

Kaplan forgoes the contemporary practice of dis­
association of subject and object by manipulative
techniques. The complicit embrace of her subject and
object has locked within it many of the eternal questions
about the representation of objective reality.

In a recent interview, choreographer Edouard Lock
says, “quelque part, même si on a le désir d’être désor­
rénté, il y a aussi le désir contraire de ne pas perdre
l’orientation, le sens. Ces deux réalités se contrebala­
dent dans l’expérience du chorégraphie moderne.”

Mostly, we are left with allusions to the spirituality
of the creative act and the possibility of transcending
earthbound realities.

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Initiated and circulated by Gallery John A. Schweitzer, Montreal, the exhibit will be
travelling until July 1992. It is presently at Stadschouwburg, in Holland, and will be
going to Sommersze, Austria and Galerie Frédéric Bazille, France.