

Cat Lady and Cougar

Digital Images, 2012

Women are often associated with animals in semiotic labeling and stereotyping. One has a substantial list of terms at one's disposal when looking for a derogatory slur for a woman: bitch, cow, chick, sow, cat lady, cougar, etc. The list is much more limited when intended for male slander: dog, pig, ass, and bear. The male slights are also much more non-gendered than those intended for women—pig, dog and ass can all be used as descriptive for both males and females, whereas one would not refer to a man as a cow or a bitch, except when perhaps referring unkindly to a 'feminine' homosexual man. Slurs against men are generally more based in the sexual arena and are associated with power: prick, dick, mother f***er, and son of a bitch, to name a few (in the latter two cases, the insult is even deferred back to the female.)

"*Cat Lady*" and "*Cougar*" play with two of these semiotic labels. Taking the evaluative means outlined by Terry Barrett in *Criticizing Photography*, my images present a personal interpretation of the linguistic rhetoric inherent within these descriptives and turning them on their heads. Photographic illustrations of "cat lady" and "cougar" have been staged using my own body. In social terms, my body is slowly headed towards these "cougar" and "cat lady" territories; I am a single woman, past my prime, and must, therefore, either be a sad recluse existing exclusively in the company of my feline friends, or be a woman on the prowl for a much younger 'victim' [sic] man. Displacing the subject (myself) into a diorama in a wildlife museum (literally turning myself into an animal and a fossil), brings a humorous awareness to the problematic of biased categorization.

Like Barbara Kruger, and as outlined in *Criticizing Photography*, my aim is a moral one and based in the feminist tradition: to expose and to condemn social clichés imbedded in our culture (117). The camera inherently suspends animation, and Kruger selects already existing "set-up" studio shots in which the camera "records an animation performed only to be suspended" (116). In staging the photographs and then re-contextualizing certain elements by displacement, I am also employing this suspension. In "*Cat Lady*", by using a cougar and bobcat in lieu of the domestic kitty, I have transferred the power back to the representation of the female. She is heavily made-up and artificial, yet there is a playful shift in the power of her gaze. She does not meet the viewer's eye, looking past him/her, and in this way, vulnerability is subverted. The walls are up: who or what is on the defensive? Who is playing at what and for whom?

Works Cited:

Barrett, Terry. *Criticizing Photographs: An Introduction to Understanding Photographs (Fourth Edition)*. Mountain View, Calif.: Mayfield Publishing Co., 1990.

House Bunny

Digital image, 2012

In *House Bunny* I am enacting a displacement of references from historical time and re-contextualizing these stereotypical tropes in 'staged' time. In referencing a 'past'—recreating through colour, costume and 'feel' the nostalgia of the 1950s—but also in freezing a dramatic moment in time and playing with scale, I am setting up the photograph to read like an exaggerated, frozen theatrical moment. In "Criticizing Photographs", Terry Barrett writes that photographs are "literally 'out of context'. They are out of a spatial context, and they are also out of a temporal flow."¹ As a material, photography allows the artist to manipulate expectations and representation. I am doing this in *House Bunny* by subverting a contextual stereotype and the representation of feminine identity. Ernst van Alphen, in discussing Cindy Sherman's Film Stills in "Art in Mind" states that in her work "we see a photograph of a subject that is constructed in the image of representation."² He argues that identity is built socially and referentially rather than authentically. Thus, we often find reflected in photographs a subject that is built on the idea of a subject rather than a true to life image of specificity and individualism.

House Bunny is a humorous play on words. A bunny, in reference to a woman, conjures the image of a young woman, not too bright and bubbly, and one who loves to have a good time. Our *House Bunny* is engaged in the drudgery of washing the dishes. The irony implied is that women should always be cheerful and sexually attractive, even when doing the housework (this myth was propagated in much of the advertising for home products in the 1950s and 60's). This reading shifts when we discover that there is an actual bunny that appears as a giant vision in the window, physically throwing our subject off balance and disturbing our subjectivity. Is this a still from a B-horror film, or a warning against worshipping the consumer utopia we are fed by the media and advertising? The kitsch object is the ultimate exaggerated social construct and a vehicle for representing over-aestheticized signs. In *House Bunny* the kitsch bunny both watches over the scene but also acts as a warning to the viewer always to question what is seen in representation. Following Barrett's prescriptive that what makes a photograph compelling is the potential for multiple interpretations, I have left the final reading of the *House Bunny* open, asking questions rather than making a definitive statement.³

1 Barrett, Terry. *Criticizing Photographs: An Introduction to Understanding Photographs (fourth ed)*. Mountain View, Calif.: Mayfield Publishing Co.,1990. 108.

2. van Alphen, Ernst. *Art in Mind: How Contemporary Images Shape Thought*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2005. 28.

3. Barrett, Terry. *Criticizing Photographs*. 125.

Running with scissors and Knock yourself out (after Muybridge)

Digital print on fine art paper, 2012

In thinking about the medium of photography in relation to film, the iconic images of Eadvard Muybridge immediately spring to mind. His photographs of human locomotion exemplify the concept of time (in stopping it in sequences of linear fragments) and the relation of the figure to matter and space (by mapping out and measuring the body on a grid as it moves through the frame). Here, I think that the description of “time fossilized”, used by Laura Mulvey in her essay “Stillness in the moving image”, is an apt description, especially because the images of Muybridge have an aged and historic quality (138.) In providing a fossilized image, one allows for pensiveness, or as Mulvey says, “time to reflect on time itself”: the essence of what it is to *be* and to *act* human within a specific set of cultural expectations, and in a particular point in history, is captured (139). We are defined through the space and time we occupy, both on a physical and metaphysical level. The stillness and contemplation in a frozen moment also highlights the ‘acted-out-ness of these actions. In an almost absurd way, Muybridge’s images aim a spotlight on the gender roles that are constructed and assigned to us in society. These propagated gender roles (although different) are still prevalent in the mass media and popular culture today, as they were in the late 1800s when Muybridge was working.

I have chosen to work with two actions that are not generally equated with the accoutrement of femininity. Both sequences are imbued with multiple linguistic and metaphoric readings. “Running with scissors” implies an action that will inevitably end in disaster and physical harm. It is something that children are chastised for. On first glance, the woman in “Running with scissors”, looks like a benign female figure engaged in a slow run. Once we realize, however, that she is donning a pair of sheers, that are dangerously snipping at the air abreast of her, the woman transforms into a murderous hysterical woman gone off the rails. Because this is a digital image—the original frame and setting of a Muybridge sequence have been overlaid with cut and layered contemporary interventions—the scissors are a fitting symbol for the re-contextualizing exercise of the postmodern collage. (It should also be noted that there was an added layer of constructivism in my images as I had to re-enact the action multiple times. My camera’s continuous shooting capability was not fast enough to capture the full sequence of the motion in one take.)

In “Knock yourself out” it is unclear whether our heroine is on the aggressive or the defensive. The sequence is odd in its “over-acted” action. We are not used to seeing the female figure playing at such physical agency, especially because she is inhabiting the appropriated space of the late-nineteenth century. When seen in relation to Muybridge’s other images, “Running with scissors” and “Knock yourself out”, give us entrance to seeing the absurdity and formulaic performance present, to a certain degree, in all images and action, and especially in staged photography and the cinematic space.

Works Cited:

Mulvey, Laura. “Stillness in the Moving Image: Ways of Visualizing Time and Its Passing” (2003) in *The Cinematic*. Ed. David Company, The MIT Press: Cambridge and Massachusetts.