

INTERVIEW ANNE COLLIER



Untitled (Light Years, Douglas Kirkland), 2009, *C-print*, cm 116.84 x 150

In Between Tom McDonough in conversation with **ANNE COLLIER**

Born in Los Angeles in 1970, Collier currently lives in New York. Recently her work has been on show at Anton Kern Gallery, New York, Galerie Giti Nourbakhsh, Berlin, Art Pace, San Antonio (Texas), Les Rencontres d'Arles (France) and Lewis Glucksman Gallery, Cork (Ireland). Her use of photography in exposing pop culture artifacts; the confluence of the cool, technical surface of her images and the warm, earthy overtones of the objects she exposes question the way our feelings are triggered and our gaze functions.

TOM McDONOUGH: *There is frequent discussion of "re-photography" in relation to your work, but I am as much struck by your mode of presentation - by its insistent two-dimensionality and the rectilinear format of what is pictured, the way it echoes the frame: photographs of open books, of other photographs, of puzzles, of magazine covers, of movie frames. Can you talk about this consistent approach - an approach that I might polemically characterize as one that, in its formality, approaches a refusal of photography's historic task of appropriating the world at large in favor of an insistence on the studio? More generally, could you talk about the general rules or strategies that govern your photographic project?*

ANNE COLLIER: For the past few years I have been working exclusively in the studio, and shooting on film with a large format plate camera. It is a cumbersome and highly formal process that - once I have decided on a certain approach - provides little or no room for improvisation. Consequently most things need to be worked out in advance, usually through more informal photographic studies that I make using a small digital camera. Working with photography you are constantly aware of framing, it is inherent to the process: from the film stock via the camera's viewfinder to the resulting print, you are always aware of the limits of each image. A lot of the work is shot with a rostrum set-up, where you are shooting static objects from above. The plane of the camera and the object being

photographed need to be perfectly parallel to one another, otherwise you end up with distortions in the image. This creates a literal flatness that is evident in my images of jigsaw puzzles or the black-and-white images of eyes in developing trays for example. My approach is influenced by both technical and advertising photography, where there is an emphasis on clarity, where a desire typically exists to depict something in an unambiguous manner. I've previously described my interpretation of this aesthetic as being somewhat forensic. The tension in my work, such as it is, is to apply this somewhat restrained and essentially objective approach to subject matter that is more ambiguous and unstable (emotional, psychological, etc.). I'm trying to establish a tension between how an image looks and what it describes or alludes to.

One instance of this approach are the open books, which you subtitle "Crépuscules." In French this term could refer either to sunrise or sunset, and it immediately recalls Charles Baudelaire, two of whose most famous poems from the Les Fleurs du mal were the Crépuscule du soir and the Crépuscule du matin. But Baudelaire's were insistently urban images, of the fall of night in the big city and the dawn after the debauched evening. In your photos, however, we see books displaying nature images, these transitional moments in an idyllic setting. What are you after here, and why that shift from culture to nature? (Unless, of course, photographic mediation itself stands in for that urban culture ambivalently embraced by the 19th-century poet.) My use of "Crépuscules" in the works you refer to is more literal: the book depicted in the images is actually called Crépuscules. The book was published in France so it is more than likely that they were alluding to Baudelaire. (The short texts printed in the book include writings by Victor Hugo and C. G. Jung.) The book is from the mid-1980s and consists solely of images of sunsets and sunrises. The images are almost clichéd and very reminiscent of stock photographs, in that they depict the kind of universal - and escapist - images that might be used

in motivational posters, calendars, or on greeting cards. So on the one hand they are very ordinary, pedestrian even, but on the other hand they still describe a kind photographic sublime. In my photographs the viewer is aware that they are looking at an image that depicts another person looking at an image, so there is a kind of doubling at play, where the real subject of the work is not so much a sunset or a stormy sea, but rather the activity of looking at something.

I'm curious about the Abstract Expressionism reference of Puzzle: a photo of an open box containing a jigsaw puzzle of Jackson Pollock's Convergence, a drip painting of 1952. The puzzle was originally released in 1964 as a 340-piece jigsaw called "the world's most difficult," although you photographed the 1968 version, which consists of 500 pieces. There seems to be some reference to the commercialization of modernism, but also perhaps to something else, some reference to the link made popularly between Pollock's "action painting" and the unconscious - could we think of the photo of this disassembled puzzle as invitation to reconstruction? As a certain type of therapy?

I came across a number of vintage jigsaw puzzles of abstract paintings, including the Pollock, one of a Hans Hoffman, and another of an abstract work by Roy Lichtenstein. All were produced in the 1960s, when I assume that abstract art was still regarded with a degree of skepticism by the public. As you suggest I was interested in the relationship between abstract art and the unconscious, which the fragmented puzzle pieces seemed to underscore, and also that these were fairly early manifestations of an attempt to both commercialize and democratize contemporary art. (Of course now it is commonplace to see images of avant-garde artworks on umbrellas, T-shirts, coffee mugs, ties, etc.) I was also interested that the jigsaw puzzles were literally photographic representations of unique objects (paintings.) A lot of my work is concerned with the manifestation of photographic images in, or on, everyday objects, e.g. album covers, posters, puzzles, magazine covers, advertisements,

books, etc. I'm sure for many people - myself included - these engagements with photographic imagery were among their earliest encounters with both the abundance and the potential of photography. I think of most of my work as a form of still life, and many of the works take the form of images of various kinds of photographic objects. This distinction is important to me, as I don't think of my work as appropriation or even re-photography, where a degree of confusion is created around the authorship of an image. In my work it is usually very clear that you are looking at an image of an existing object, or a group of objects.

That might bring us to the four-part photograph, First Person, which depicts a "personality profile checklist." Once again we find the theme of pop psychology. But what about format, with the book open and single pages photographed - not centered, but as they would appear on the plate of a photocopy machine, with the facing page extending to corner of frame. And with those very prominent black borders. Why this presentation? What link might it have to the book's content?

Photographing an open, bound book is a challenge. You are always aware of the binding, the gutter, and subsequent curvature of the pages, which invariably creates distortions in the text. Most people would be familiar with this issue, as you suggest, from photocopying things, where the pages of a book need to be flattened out to create a legible copy (often damaging the book's spine). I've made a number of images of individual book pages, where the image is cropped to show only a fraction of the facing page. With First Person, which consists of four separately framed photographs, I wanted to emphasize the serial nature of the list itself, which was printed over four separate pages of a self-help manual, and also to play - visually - with the idea of the pages being turned, which is alluded to through their presentation as a sequential group of four photographs. At a distance there's a formal symmetry and rhythm to the four works, which creates a kind of unfolding



Above Developing Tray #2 (Grey), 2009, *C-print*, cm 109.2 x 133.4
Below Cut (Color), 2010, *C-type print*, cm 111.1 x 134.6

visual narrative, which I hope both mirrors and is amplified by the continuous nature of the text/list itself.

Untitled is photographed from celebrity photographer Douglas Kirkland's 1989 collection, Light Years. It shows Judy Garland in New York in 1961, presumably at the time of her renowned Carnegie Hall concert. I am first struck by the tragic quality of the subject herself, but that emotional response is then undercut by the banal gutter of the book and the Post-It notes marking pages. Could you talk a bit about that ambivalent gesture, about the pointing-to and simultaneous withholding of identification with the subject?

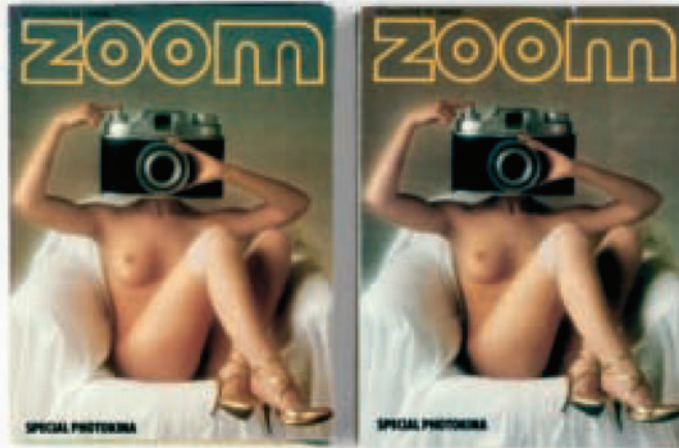
I had noticed that I had accumulated dozens of books in my studio where I had left Post-It notes marking images that I was either interested in or that I wanted to refer to in relation to my own work. Some books had many Post-It notes attached, and I started to become interested in how the accumulated Post-It notes functioned as a kind of frame around individual images or the book itself. They looked like a kind of abstracted frame or a multi-hued fringe. Also each Post-It note obviously identified an image that I was drawn to, so they became place markers for an ongoing archive, an image-bank of sorts, of images that I felt resonated with my work. I became interested in this double activity: the identification of a striking image and the subsequent act of acknowledging and recording its existence. Placing a Post-It note on a particular image was a way of claiming it, making it one's own, even when the images - like the one of Judy Garland or the one of Marilyn Monroe - are so well known as to be almost in the public domain. Like writing your name on an album sleeve, attaching a Post-It note to an image was a way to take possession of it somehow.

This perhaps brings us to what I consider the central motif of your recent work: the eye, the eye that looks back at us. Developing Tray #2 establishes a kind of mise-en-abyme, in which your (?) eye mirrors ours, and you are mirrored in your own eye as you take the photo,

with both of these contained within the self-reflexive gesture of the developing tray, and the black-and-white photo within the color print. All this generates some weird uncanny feeling, tied perhaps to something about the alertness of the gaze, and the curiously organic form of the tray itself, whose lower left corner recalls the peculiar shape of the tear duct in the human eye. Where does this come from? What sort of antecedents are mobilized in this work? Does surrealism stand somewhere in the background?

Surrealism certainly, but I was more influenced by how surrealism was eventually co-opted into advertising and commercial design. The eye has a pretty established lineage in photographic history (Man Ray, Herbert Bayer, etc.), to the point where, as a convention, it is something of a cliché. But at the same time it remains a compelling analogous image, simply because the camera approximates the mechanics of the eye and seeing to such an extraordinary degree. A few years ago I'd started to collect album covers that incorporated images of eyes - both open and closed. In the visual languages of popular music the eye was possibly as common as in photography itself. In the music context the eye image functioned as a kind of visual shorthand for the threshold between the rational world and the world of the unconscious (another sort of cliché). I am trying to allow these independent, but related, histories to co-exist in works such as *Developing Tray #2*, to create a kind of pop-historical image. Of course the works also allude to the analog photographic process, which my work is still rooted in, even if it is staged in these images.

A follow-up, since this is even truer of Cut, which seems to refer to the famous scene in Luis Buñuel Un chien andalou from 1929, in which a young woman has her eye slit open by a razor. In both these photos we find a balance of the matter-of-factness of the photographer's traditional - if increasingly obsolete - tools (developing tray, paper cutter) and the violent effect generated by the image itself. Does some punishment for the assumption of the masculine preroga-



tive of the gaze lurk behind the image?

That wasn't my motivation, or even intention, but it is clearly part of the image's potential. I am interested in the idea that my works can be quite open-ended and that they can withstand all kind of scrutiny. Certainly the way the works look might encourage a formal or even academic approach, but at the same time the works evolve in a fairly intuitive and organic way - a process usually triggered by my finding something at the flea market, or in a thrift store, or online. Often the works have quite sentimental or melancholic subject matter - which can almost sabotage any serious intent. I am interested in working around this threshold. When I first cut a print of my own eye in two, using a paper cutter, the reference to Buñuel's *Un chien andalou* was so instantaneous that I felt that it was almost a kind of visual gag, and as such it might not survive as a photograph. However the decision to stage the two resulting parts of the image on the paper cutter itself set something else in motion, where a cause and effect scenario was established. I liked this visual tautology, where the final image partly describes the process of its making.

I would also like to hear more about the conjunction of woman/camera/look in Zoom 1978, with its doubled covers of an old copy of the Italian photography magazine - a tamed surrealism in the image of a woman whose head has been replaced by camera. She possesses the gaze, but only at the cost of a kitsch objectification. What is the place of masochism in this project? And, for that matter, popular culture and kitsch, which are everywhere in your work, very self-consciously and knowingly cited, from Pollock jigsaw puzzles to soft-core photography magazines, to romantic nature photos.

A number of my works make reference to the 1978 film *Eyes of Laura Mars*, in which Faye Dunaway plays a fashion photographer whose works evoke the violence-glamour chic of Guy Bourdin and Helmut Newton, who probably would have been at the peak of their notoriety around that time. Bourdin

and Newton's influence was pervasive in this era. In photography magazines such as *Zoom* (and many others), women were commonly fetishized in compromised scenarios. The original *Zoom* image juxtaposes the kind of soft, out-of-focus eroticism of someone like David Hamilton with a post-pop caricature of woman as camera/object/machine. These types of depictions recur throughout that era. I was interested in how photography was partly the subject of these earlier images, and how at that time, photography was promoted along such divisive and gendered lines. (The up-market photographic journals of the time were almost exclusively targeted at men, as can be determined by both the editorial content and the nature of the advertisements.) Of course around this time artists such as Cindy Sherman, Sherrie Levine, Louise Lawler, and Laurie Simmons were just starting out, and soon the conversation around gender, photography, and representation etc. would shift radically.

You have mentioned a number of artists of the Pictures generation here, but earlier distanced yourself from the practices of appropriation and re-photography that they notably deployed. Could you speak briefly of where you see your own work fitting into the recent history of photography? It seems to me to occupy a highly original position: neither the nostalgic mourning for the passing of analog technology (although some sense of this may be present, at least allegorically,) nor an embrace of large-scale, digitally manipulated images. Where does your aesthetic of the copy stand place itself?

There's probably a greater freedom in photography now than at any point in its history, the lines between different approaches seem to be more elastic. Hopefully my work can occupy multiple positions simultaneously. The consistent feature of my current work is the use of the studio as both a framing device and as a 'stage' for various kinds of photographic tableaux. The work is as informed by commercial and technical photography as it is by 'art' photography, and I'm interested in continuing to negotiate the space between these different uses of photography.



Your Personality Profile Checklist.

39. I am egotistical.
40. I am easily led.
41. I am encouraging to others.
42. I enjoy taking care of others.
43. I expect others to admire me.
44. I complain.
45. I find I am often disappointed.
46. I am firm but just.
47. I like everyone.
48. I am forceful.
49. I am friendly.
50. I forgive anything.
51. I find I am often angry.
52. I am friendly all the time.
53. I am too generous.
54. I give my time and energy to others.
55. I am a good leader.
56. I am grateful.
57. I can be hardened if necessary.
58. I am helpful.
59. I am hard-boiled.
60. I am hard to convince.
61. I am modest.
62. I am hard to impress.
63. I get impatient when others make mistakes.
64. I do well on my own.
65. I get irritable.
66. I am jealous.
67. I am kind and reassuring.
68. I like responsibility.
69. I lack self-confidence.
70. I let others make decisions.
71. I like to compete with others.
72. I like everybody.
73. I like to be taken care of.
74. I love everybody.
75. I make a good impression.
76. I manage others well.
77. I am neat.
78. I have a hot temper.
79. I hardly ever mouth off.
80. People often admire me.
81. I obey too willingly.
82. I often wear glasses.

Here First Person 1-4, 2009, C-print cm 92.7 x 102.4

Page 83, top Zoom 1978, 2009, C-print, cm 99.87 x 122

Page 83, bottom Studio Floor #3 (Marilyn Monroe, Norman Mailer), 2009, C-print, cm 107.2 x 142.75

Next spread Open Book #2 (Crépuscules), 2009, C-print, cm 112.2 x 149.86

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