

## The Naked Truth

the female nude and political correctness

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Bill Jay

*...A photography exhibition devoted to a historical survey of images of female and male nudes is so caught up in the "politics" of the very meaning of displaying the unclothed body that any other discussions - aesthetic, moral, technical - seem beside the point...*

*The past twenty years have made it impossible to discuss the nude photography apart from the political agenda it serves. And what that agenda includes can be summarized this way: to perpetuate sexual and racial stereotypes; to deepen the cultural bias and animosity toward women; to maintain the distance that separates men from women; to sustain the belief that women, usually (and men, occasionally) are objects, to be used, bought, traded, sold, and to perpetuate the hold which the (white) patriarchy has on the culture.*

This was written by Ed Osowski, reviewing the exhibition "Explicit Image II" in Spot, Summer 1988, p.19

His assertions are true.

They are true in the sense that a white male who is independent or rash enough to photograph a nude female will be lambasted for his chauvinistic gall by disapproving critics, like Ed Osowski, who comprise a disproportionately large percentage of those writers who fill up the pages of fine-art photography's periodicals.

It is not true in the sense that the assertions are fair, reasonable or held by the majority of photographers and viewers, male or female.

If you are a young male photographer, interested in making images of the female nude, and intimidated by the vocal, strident minority who dominate photographic criticism, let me offer you a few words of warning about critics and writers

(including me), and some good reasons why you should ignore their strictures.

Ideally, photographic criticism should provide one or more of the following services: introduce you to photographers of whom you were unaware; expand your appreciation of a photographer's work; place the images in the context of photography's history; place the images in the context of the artist's culture; and, while accomplishing these services, throw light upon the creative/artistic process. These services demand that the critic demonstrates superior knowledge and insight. The result will be photographic writing which is informative, elevating and, above all else, useful.

The problem with so much of photographic writing at present is that it is destructive, mean-spirited and useless to the practicing photographer. Critical opinions should always be taken with a large grain of salt. For the most part, they are manifestations of the critic's debate with himself as to what opinions he should hold in order to be a fully paid up member of the group to which he aspires to belong. These opinions may have no direct relevance to the photographs being discussed.

So when critics tell you that all nudes are political in meaning, what they are really saying is this: in order to be accepted and liked by our peers we have decided that all nudes should be considered political. In this sense, critics are telling you more about themselves than about the photographs.

Remember this. All meaning in photography is imposed; it is not intrinsic to the images. Criticism is not a true/false test, with the critic acting as examiner, deciding which images pass and which fail, by the application of an infallible decree. More likely, the image is merely a springboard from which the writer dives into his/her mental pool of doubts, frustrations, complex and competing motives, and subjective fears and wishes. From such a stew of uncertainties and ambiguities we are indeed fortunate if anything of value is dredged.

Let's take a specific example. A female critic recently wrote about the nudes of Edward Weston by saying: "He made nudes so grandly impersonal as to make a woman uneasy." Fair comment. But note the "a". A woman. Just one. Not "all women" or "Woman" or "some women", but a particular individual. Guess who? This is not nit-picking. What I am attempting to show is that this statement, under the guise of a true assertion, becomes a very personal opinion. The critic is saying: I find E.W.'s nudes unsettling.

She continues:

*He said he meant to obliterate the personal element, so his nudes are intended to represent pure form, but ultimately his denial of their humanity, individuality, and eroticism is distasteful. He hid their faces, less, perhaps, from discretion than from his feeling that they were primarily bodies to be made love to ...*

I am so grateful to the writer for slipping in that word "perhaps", because it, alone, demonstrates a charming vulnerability in a passage which would otherwise have a ring of authority, masking a personal opinion. (And let us ignore the contradiction that first Weston denies eroticism but then, in the next sentence, feels like making love.) The issue here is that the author thinks that nudes which represent pure form are "distasteful." At this point we have to wonder what is going on. First, Weston stated quite clearly what he intended (pure form) and then is castigated for doing it well; second, the critic presumes, on the evidence of a few photographs, that Weston wanted to make love to all his models; third, if Weston had made images reflecting his sexual desire, that would also have been distasteful. The poor guy could not win.

It would be reasonable to assume, from this quotation, that the critic does not like the idea of men photographing naked females, and that Weston's photographs are merely the excuse to express that opinion.

I am not intending to denigrate this particular critic (who happens to be one of the most astute, intelligent and intelligible writers on photography) but to demonstrate that opinions are not fact. Also, I have no objection to a critic telling me, up front and frankly, what artists and images he/she likes and dislikes. This is useful to know. But that is very, very different from laying down the law. The one thing I most emphatically will not tolerate from a critic is that he/she tells me what I ought to condemn or approve of or believe.

And that is precisely what Osowski and his ilk attempt to do. Reread the opening quotation. It is impossible, he says, to discuss (and therefore photograph) the nude without a political agenda. And that agenda is very specific, as the rest of the quotation makes clear. You can read this agenda in writings by many fine art critics. Indeed, it has become the dogma of all "serious" critics who wish to pander to their peers. It has become the articles of faith by which the adherents are approved and given space in the journals or a platform at conferences, as rewards for devotion to the cause.

It is pure, unadulterated, propaganda, the sole purpose of which is to intimidate

the reader into the correct (i.e. the critic's) frame of mind. The thunder rolls, the lightning flashes, and out of the darkness strides the stern critic bearing the stone on which is chiseled irrevocably and indelibly: Thou Shalt Not... Melodramatic hogwash.

So listen to me, young photographer. No one, least of all critics, should be able to tell you what you can or cannot photograph. And no one, least of all critics, should question your motives, through such intimidation, even before you have loaded the camera. The female nude has been a rich and rewarding subject for photography since the medium was born. Photographs have approached this subject from every conceivable motive and every, infinitely complex, set of desires. Many, it is true, have been ugly, base and destructive. Some, however, have been exquisitely beautiful and elevating. The vast majority have been somewhere in between. Just like everything else in life. So photograph the female nude if you wish. Aspire to greatness and fail. That is your prerogative. I am not advocating the subject because that would be as absurd as forbidding it. *No subject is forbidden.*

Many of you have already been infected by the critic's strictures on photographing nudes, and I sympathize. All I can do is offer you some parting notes of warning and a few words of encouragement.

Remember that critics deal in words, which convey ideas. Photographers deal in images, which convey emotions. The two activities are very different from each other and may, or may not, be useful to each other. Also remember that critics, by and large, are addressing each other - not photographers, not you - and that all their pronouncements are subjective and tentative, sure to drift in other directions with the next wind of change in group-think, no matter how portentously uttered.

As a white male photographing naked females, will you be considered exploitive, chauvinistic and a promoter of sexual stereotypes? Yes, at least by the critics and curators, because there is a bias against this subject, due to the prevailing opinions of the power people. Should this fact deter you or influence the manner in which you create images? No and no - unless of course, you expect grants, exhibitions or publications. But look at it this way: your chances of obtaining grants, exhibitions or publications are almost nonexistent unless you are already one of the favored few. So what do you have to lose?

And look at it this way: if you are promoting sexual stereotypes by photographing

nudes, then you are promoting racial stereotypes if you photographed blacks, hispanics, Asians or any other ethnic group. By extension you are guilty of reinforcing stereotypes if you photograph the elderly, children, the poor, the rich, foreigners and tourists, and so on, *ad absurdum*. All this means is that you cannot, if you are desperate to avoid all possible charges of exploitation, photograph anything except rocks and tract-homes and peeling posters. And, believe me, someone is sure to find political/sexual motivation and meaning even in these subjects.

Can/should photographs be made out of simple, direct sexual attraction and not be exploitive of the female? Of course. Sex has been around a long time and it is here to stay. It is a natural, normal, healthy, life affirming instinct, and only the walking dead would deny it. It is the genesis of some of the world's greatest art. It is also true that some will prey on this instinct for reasons of greed, rage and corruption, but that does not mean the instinct itself is abhorrent or cannot be utilized to create affirmative images. The only guide you possess in this quest is your own integrity and "sense of rightness." You can safely, and righteously, ignore the critics.

If all else fails, use a female pseudonym (for the same reasons some 19c female writers used male names) and the very different reaction of the critics will prove that the image itself is not the issue, but the gender of its maker. And nothing could be more absurd (and sexist) than that.

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