

TELLING OF AN ANGEL WITH A DIRTY FACE :

The photographs of Hubert Fattal

by Matthew POOLE / October 1998

Where will the « truth » (perhaps « intention » is closer) of a photographic image have to be hidden in order that it is not corrupted by, a) its own mediation, and , b) by appropriation and immediate consumption ? Where should the sincerity of intention be activated within an artwork, on what level and / or should we need to seek this sincerity at all especially when considering photography ?

Why should I give a shit about Hubert Fattal's photographs ? I've seen images « like » this before in style magazines, in design magazines, in art magazines and in dance club magazines. I know what young people look like when they're dressed-up and out for a self-destructive good time. I have looked at and have admired photography that deals with « the everyday » and I'm getting sick of crab mannered imitations of a contemporary kitchen sink « look ». Furthermore I just get annoyed now when I see more and more autobiographical imagery on gallery walls. All the odds are stacked against me liking Hubert Fattal's photographs. But, yes you've guessed already, I do like them and I like them a lot.

I like these photographs because they manipulate me into a state of not knowing or not trusting hardly anything anymore. The thing that I do feel that I can trust, which is the intention to create some kind of identity through these images, seems so far away but I can see definitely behind all the cultural clutter that is an absolutely necessary barrier within these images. The personal is exposed at a distance of critical awareness through the delicate employment of cliché : the images are akin to both party snapshots and advertising. They often seem like pantomime, sophisticatedly staged (strictly structured), yet they are very spontaneous and immediate. They are so honest that they become clichéd, but Hubert's awareness of this is reflected within the work and it is all manipulated very carefully, as are we. You feel as though you can empathize with the subject, and then you are pushed violently away as you once again become the voyeur. These are alienating and alienated images created through a very familiar and comfortable language (although some of the images are uncomfortable and « shocking » their language of construction remains easy to swallow).

You're invited, through the photographs, to view Hubert and his friends (but mainly Hubert) dressing up, getting ready to go out, cross dressing, taking drugs, having sex, coming down, feeling high, feeling fucked-up, looking cool, looking sexy, feeling like shit, being lost, being alone. Often interspersed through-out the displays that are exhibited, are images of inanimate objects and plants that become charged with a sinister aura after Hubert has finished manipulating them using the degenerating effects inherent in colour photocopying and enlarging (which is something that Hubert does with many of the images that get used).

Polaroids, colour prints, foam board mounted enlargements, colour photocopies and laser printed images are thrown together in seemingly unstructured configurations, and sometimes in rigid geometric (almost quasi-religious) structures. There is a sense of confusion and a sense of acceleration and desperation in the connections between each element of the displays. There is so much information bombarded at the audience : so much information about one man, about the things that one man notices, cares about, loves, hates and deals with each day. Because of this glut of imagery that you are presented with, and are asked to process, each element, each image, becomes throwaway even though they are obviously carefully selected. Indeed much of Hubert's material is destroyed while being taken down or thrown away after each exhibition.

The question that you cannot help asking is how much does Hubert really care about these images and consequently how much should we care about them ? These images, however « every day », however « truthful » they may appear, are mediated and they are mediated by imitating other heavily mediated images. Are they banal ? Yes. But so what, you say to yourself, they are seductive ! But they are so honest too ; you can't tell if there is any pretension or not. You don't want there to be any, you want them just to be enigmatic personal snapshots. Suddenly they aren't banal anymore and you want to consume some more. You want to get beyond the mediation, to find what you consider to be « real », which seems so close. Hubert seems so close to you as you peer into snippets of his life. You make assumptions about him, you can almost feel like you know him, like you know what he will be like in bed. It feels good. You have been seduced and you know you have. That then feels shitty and you reassess who this photographer/model/artist/guy is and what he is trying to do. It's difficult to pin it down.

The activities that Hubert engages in seem fascinating and glamorous and then also squalid and humiliating through the voluntary exposition. Combined is a feeling of sentimentality, homely melancholy and apocalyptic nihilism mixed with a dizzying fervour ; a desire to record everything, to communicate everything. You take a step back and think perhaps it is all staged (?). No they can't be. They are too much. Too « real ». And again you try to decipher your position in relation to them.

Perhaps it's nothing to do with you. Perhaps these works are the product of a person trying to come to terms with what he is and what his place is, in a world where you cannot escape stereotypes and pre-constructed roles ? How do you escape constructing your own personality today rather than just letting it « be » or letting it just « develop » ? You cannot hope to escape the fact that as a Westerner, you cannot ignore the sophistication of your own reception of information about the culture within which you live and your relationship to it. Don't look at me, I certainly don't have any answers. What I do think, however, is that it would be nice to think that these works are nothing to do with you but they are. They reflect so much about contemporary image production, through the likes of graphic design Š advertising, tv production and other mass media forms which are of course a part of your life whether you like it or not. Something of the eternal paradox of advertising is recognised in Hubert's work. An image in an advert must seduce you and impress you and make you strive for the product that it is selling without either alienating you or itself. It has to do all of this without being the same as any other advert and yet, without being too different or else it would be invisible/unacceptable. This tricky balancing of honesty and deceit is what seems to pervade all on Hubert's practice and lends it its energy.

The « truth » or « intention » in Hubert's work seems to lie in the wanting to be all sorts of different things, all at once, in their trying to be all sorts of different thing all at once and in our trying to understand them as being all sorts of different things all at once. Perhaps is it enough that Hubert lives his life as a documentarian of that life, as a creator, director, designer, cameraman, audience, critic and theorist of that life and its exposition.

But anyway, you could think to yourself why bother ? The photographs will probably get thrown away today, but then you might think to yourself, « hopefully Hubert will take more pictures tomorrow ».

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