

She Her and Me

Iris Klein

Chris Kraus

The first thing that strikes me about Iris Klein's beautiful photographic series *She, Her and Me* is how her work evokes the emotional atmosphere of Surrealism, its sluggish and mildly electrified languor, without ever critically referencing it as an art movement. She manages to hit some of the same psychic and visual marks made in the past, without tritely historicizing it. Her work summons the sense of what can be done with free time, if we let ourselves use it.

Klein, an Austrian-born photographer now living in Brooklyn, began this body of work in the late 1990s after a seven-year stint as a fashion model in Japan and Los Angeles. Her mostly black and white photographs are exquisitely rendered as gelatin-silver prints in small editions. For seven years, between 1998-2005, Klein's images featured a lone central figure whose face was obscured (under-exposed, to the point of absolute blackness) positioned in set interior decors and desolate landscapes.

At first glance, this tall lanky figure appears to be Klein herself. But looking closer, there's something about the staticity of the pose, the elongated body that isn't quite real. It's as if Klein has given a form to active blankness, the paradoxical state that defines the profession of modeling. The figure, in fact, is a primitive doll that Klein created to approximate her own physical presence. At 5' 9 1/2", the doll is Klein's height, though thinner than humanly possible. In *Alte Frau/Old Woman* (1999/2005), the figure appears as a shopping cart lady, with a head-scarf, flat ankle-length boots and an open clasped purse.

In *Swallow 1-4* (1999/2005) she's sprawled on a bed, legs loosely spread, wearing a button-down shirt and wide-legged trousers. The figure is not artificially sexualized; it is not actively desexualized, either. It is a supine body at rest in an animal state. "Swallow" – a common bird, or digestive verb, or a pornographic imperative ... The images here act as a litmus test for the viewer. Is the figure 'feminine' first, or simply human? Few photographers have depicted male bodies in this state of mildly sexualized animal grace. The only parallel images that come to mind are Gary Boas' pictures of off-duty gay male porn stars of the 1970s in his book *New York Sex*, or publicity photographs of Vaslav Nijinsky in the Ballet Russes' 1912 production of *Afternoon of a Fawn* ...

The image/idea of the "model" has been a popular trope within

conceptual art and photography for more than a decade. There are Vanessa Beecroft's model-assaults of airbrushed Aryan armies with long legs and high cheekbones; there are Marilyn Minter's delirious nightmares of crystal-glitter consumption; there are the Bernadette Corporation's icy-eyed girls, locked in preposterous poses and clothes like a small pack of drugged Siberian huskies. Dean Sameshima aggressively situates the Calvin Klein male model as the gay porn fetish-fantasy it actually is. Klein's work is much more internal. Her images render modeling as a state of active blankness, permitting, but never soliciting, the voyeur. I think her work defines glamour.

"It was in my teenage years in Vienna that I started to see myself as someone else," Klein has written. "And I realized I was. The internalized gaze ... felt almost innate. I became fascinated by body language and pose [when] I finally resumed my work as an artist, I started objectifying myself in the form of a body double in order to extrapolate the multiple feelings and facets of everyday life. I fabricated a rag doll, I became its projection. Its artificiality was intentional, mine was not ... I wanted to examine this other self as an elusive or absent center ... I used its surface to project other personae as well ... manifesting half-conscious anxieties and desires."

After reading Elfriede Jelinek's devastating novel *Women as Lovers* about the constricted lives of two friends in a remote Alpine village, Klein began a series where she places the doll in remote rural landscapes. In *Railroad 1-3* (2001/2005), the mannequin sits between the stripped branches of a dead fallen tree beside a train track. The landscape appears disused and abandoned, a natural world that is no longer sovereign but simply awaiting future development. Born in the small town of Knittelfeld, Austria, it's a landscape Klein is familiar with. "I was interested in the kind of lives people might have in these poverty-stricken landscapes, embedded in rural areas," she told me. The emptiness in these pictures – and in the companion sequences *Resort 1-4*, *Boat 1-5*, *Baum 1-4* (2002/2005) – is not expectant, but simply desolate. It is the kind of introspection Klein replicates during long periods spent in the dark room, producing her prints. "It took two weeks to print the tree (in the *Baum* series) because the light was so different. The process is nice for two or three days – you're all by yourself, it's very meditative – but after a few days you need to get out, it becomes claustrophobic."

Klein's work is often viewed through discourses about 'femininity,' and I'd like to think that it's her willingness to experience multiplicity, and not gender itself, that provokes this. (Asked recently to talk about whether or not there's

such a thing as 'feminine writing,' I find myself saying Yes ...) Klein's pictures enact Surrealism's sense of disused, abandoned time – “those long afternoons that we knew so well how to waste,” as Andre Breton wrote in *Nadja*) – but her use of the body is happily free of Surrealism's debt to psychoanalysis. Artists like Justine Kurland stage dreamy but laden scenarios in which her subjects' faux-innocence invites violation. For Klein, absence is more a fact than a lack, and looking is not the same thing as penetration. (When I think of 'feminine writing,' I think of a wildness ... a willingness to be more than one thing, to channel multiple streams of information on a very deep level.)

Klein's most recent series – *Le Desir* (2007) – substitutes her own form for the mannequin. Wearing a blonde Marilyn wig and a slightly flared knee-length cotton skirt, she embraces the most skeletal empty form of a male mannequin. Her 'lover' is no more than a dark suit and a hat. Barefooted, she dances with him against a white studio backdrop, the two casting deep shadows. The prints have the gorgeous large porous grain of old black and white movies. They're at once funny and ghostly and deeply romantic. The wig is the only link to the seemingly obvious influence of Cindy Sherman. Looking closer, the 16-part series is diametrically opposed to Sherman's notion of "image." Like classical glamour photography, the pictures in *Le Desir* draw the viewer in. There is no "story" beyond the interior state evoked by the picture itself. Boldly allowing her work to stand for itself without any gratuitous cultural referents, Klein creates an unselfconsciously intimate world where disclosure is subtle and nuanced and private.