

RE: PHOTOGRAPHICA

INTERACTIONS WITH AND INTERPRETATIONS OF CONTEMPORARY PHOTOGRAPHY

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Book of the Year: Anatomy, by Malerie Marder



In November I saw a PDF version of Malerie Marder's new book, published by Twin Palms. On screen, and when I received the finished book, it made a deep impression, both intellectually and viscerally. It has lingered and haunted me since. No other book this year, or in several years, has had such an impact on me.

Marder's work is provocative, and she has refined her skills to a point of dramatic simplicity. The women she has photographed, Dutch prostitutes, embody and stir desire as a way of life. In this heterosexual male's opinion, however, they are repulsive, anything but attractive; there is not a figure, a face, or a bodily pose that draws me. Except that Marder has photographed these women, singly and in staged groups, in ways that prompt consideration of them as objects of allure--colors, settings, costumes, lighting, focus, all tuned to radiate sensuality. And the women, a *dramatis personae* largely uncostumed, are complicit, clearly engaged in a collaborative effort to simulate...what? Sexiness? Seduction? If anything, a somber self-awareness seems the operative mode.

The antitheses to these disaffected tarts would be the images E. J. Bellocq made in New Orleans' Storyville bordellos, of prostitutes jiving the photographer, caught in between-session settings with little on their minds or bodies but a benign sense of play. There's no play in Marder's work, even in friezes that resemble ill-wrought takes on Greek tableaux. But there are occasional twists of irony, of the artist tipping her hat, that hint at a subversive willingness to tweak and tease, to remind us that the optical is the central allusion here.



"It is always the instantaneous reaction to oneself that produces a photograph," Robert Frank wrote. I believe the same holds true when looking at photographs, individually or collected in some form--one's reaction in the moment of encounter constitutes a lasting, meaningful take on that image, no matter what meta-detail is appended later. One must watch oneself watching photographs--the viewer, like the prostitutes in her images and Marder herself, must remain conscious of his or her own circumstances while regarding this work.

Vision runs amok in these photographs, never clarifying where one should look for meaning. And I'm afraid my writing can't offer much, either. Georges Bataille's comments on the insufficiency of writing as a tool for describing lives, compared to prostitute's bodies, is inscribed on the jacket-less cover of the book.* I can't testify to the truth of this. What I do know is the deep sense of disturbance these photographs create in me. Writing to Twin Palms' publicist, I expressed the following, feeling scarcely coherent after just viewing *Anatomy* in PDF.

I need to cleanse my brain after looking at this work. Deeply troubling. I'm not sure how I would write about this book. It really pushes my buttons. One thing that contributes to that is the shifting alignment of the pages, from the horizontal arrangement to the vertical. It's a big book, according to the description below, and that re-orienting might be easier to accomplish with the book than with my laptop. Actually, at 18 x 13 one might be able to reorient simply with the head and the eyes.

The bigger challenge is conceptual, reorienting to Marder's vision of the bodies in front of her. And to the self-conscious presentations that these women are creating. This

collaboration really digs into some complex psycho-space. Exploring my own psyche, I am compelled to say that I find almost nothing sexy about this work, though there is a lot that is sexual about it. Anatomy is a cold and fitting title--not strictly physical anatomy, which is there but takes the shotgun seat next to the driver, a less tangible assessment of the shape of desire--men's, women's, photography's.

The photography itself is seductive. Marder's images destabilize the illicit qualities of her complex subject, which fluctuates between social commentary, analytical fetishism, and psychological portraiture. At once beguiling and stand-off-ish, the virtuosity in her work and her edit makes me reconsider this big book again and again. And I remain repulsed, and fascinated by my repulsion. Someone's desires must be channeling through these enactments; but who, why, how? This is Marder's most significant accomplishment--enacting desire by rejecting its most overt expression.

I think it's hard to name books of the year. Short of a receiving clerk at photo-eye, who can really see enough of the shelves-full that are published annually to arrive at a sufficient judgment? All I can do is respond to myself, to the books that have crossed my visual field, and say that Marder's *Anatomy* has poked, prodded, and provoked me like no other in many moons.

* The excerpt, originally in French, is from Bataille's essay "The Problems of Surrealism" and appears, in a variant translation by Michael Richardson, in *The Absence of Myth: Writings on Surrealism*, published by Verso, 1994.

[The book](#) on Twin Palms' web site

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