A SELF-REFLECTION ON MY PROJECT 'REPOSE'

Larina Annora Fernandes

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Critical Paper : A Self-reflection on my project 'RePose'

INTRODUCTION

My mother worked abroad for most of my childhood. We didn't have Skype or any other form of video calling that we take for granted today and so we had to resort to the out-dated modes of communication i.e. air mail letters and 2 am trunk calls instead.

One of my dad's first and finest investments in an attempt to bridge this gap was a film camera. He would spend hours taking pictures of my sister and me every weekend. We would put on our newest and best clothes, hats and shoes, head off to more scenic places like the beach or hanging gardens in the posh part of Bombay and pose unabashedly for the camera. We knew who the photographs were meant for, so we'd make an extra effort to smile and hug, to show my mum how much we loved each another, even though we'd be fighting like cats and dogs at home.

But it was this constant stream of images across our two worlds that shaped our relationship with our mum. All made possible by the Toshiba Camera, which became a substitute for her watchful gaze.

"Death should dazzle when you stare at it"

- Giovanni Pascoli, aesthete[1]

Chapter 1: **CAUGHT DEAD**

It all started when I stumbled across a website called "Attractive Corpse – Suicide with Style"[2] (See figure 01), which offered "clients a full range of services - from method, location, and fashion consultation to suicide note editing and final-state photography – and guarantee that your suicide will be an event that nobody will easily forget." (Attractive Corpse[TM], 2005–2013). At first I could not deal with the ethical implication, but I kept revisiting the website and eventually I started asking myself; What was wrong about considering how you look when you die?

All throughout history there is precedence for death and dress. Funeral rituals and the tradition of dressing bodies of the dead were part of religious rites. Audrey Linkman's book 'Photography and Death'[3] (See figure 02 & 03) was a key text that gives an overview of funereal photography.

My research guided me towards the arrangement of such death scenes. Izima Kaoru's series 'Landscapes with a corpse'[4] (See figures 04 & 05) took me in a similar albeit new direction. His deliberate arrangement of corpses in a particular environment was indicative of an event rather than a suggestion of an aftermath. However his use of high-end clothing was the twist that pointed to what the corpse was wearing as the main subject of the story rather than the act of murder or the discovery of it.

I had the perfect title for my project – 'Caught Dead'. It would be a series of constructed death scenes, centred on the theme of suicide, but using elaborately dressed dead bodies.

There were three projects I undertook around this time that helped me gain more insight into 'Caught Dead'.

The first was a Video presentation using time-lapse and light painting for the assignment 'What is a Photograph?'[5]. (See figure 09)

The second project was for the assignment 'Who is the photographer?'[6] (See figure 10)

The third was a series of Screen grabs of pixelated video entitled 'Pixelated' [7] (See figure 11)

All three projects helped me understand what I expected to get out of the final project and how to work within constrains. More importantly it helped me understand my role as a photographer and director of the project and how to improve on my research skills.

At this time however, I received news of my dad's heart attack and subsequent admission into hospital. Instinctively, I came to a screeching halt and turned right around from the topic of death. I could no longer bring myself to deal with it and so I was now left with no next step.

This was sadly the abrupt death of 'Caught Dead' and the birth of 'RePose'

"…To die, to sleep;

To sleep: perchance to dream: ay, there's the rub;

For in that sleep of death what dreams may come…"

- William Shakespeare, Hamlet, III.i.64-67

Chapter 2 : **REPOSE**

While writing my first paper on 'What sort of evidence do photographs supply?', I at last found some clarity. I felt strongly about the authenticity of photography and the ease with which an image can be interpreted in different ways depending on factors like social, political and personal experiences, etc. I was interested in Roland Barthes's book, 'Camera Lucida', particularly because he related most of his theories on 'punctum'[8] and 'studium'[9] to his own emotional relationship with photographs of his deceased mother.

This subjective[10] quality of the photograph intrigued me and I wanted to encapsulate all the factors, i.e. the subject, the photographer, the medium and the viewer into my project.

With the Interim Show 2012 looming close and my lack of subject matter, I was encouraged to produce work that I wouldn't necessarily relate to my final project but be more or less an extension of it. With this in mind I hit upon the idea of using sleep as a metaphor for death. Sleep had popped up several times in my research earlier and it seemed fitting to use it now as a perfect substitute for death.

Being unsure of how to relate sleep to appearance, I had to strip the project back to the basic elements – background, subject and clothing. I started with backgrounds. I went scouting for locations and took several images of spaces that interested me. I also looked at reference images of bodies in spaces[11] (See figures 12 - 15). I found several books and images to help me get a visual understanding of space. I experimented with photographing landscapes to get an idea of framing space (See figures 16-22).

Then just as I was about to give up, I finally had a stroke of brilliance - photographing people while they sleep, in their beds, but wearing clothes that they would normally wear outdoors. My first hurdle was: How? The answer was simple; A laptop, a camera, time lapse and long exposures in ambient light. After a quick mental checklist and couple of test shoots, I went about finding some guinea pigs. At the end of my trials I had three final subjects. The resulting images entitled 'RePose', were both simple in execution and rich in context. (See figures 23-25)

"Actors if you ruin yourself buying costumes for the beholder, you have no taste, and you forget that the beholder means nothing to you"

- Denis Diderot (Fried, 1980: 95)

Chapter 3 : **ABSORPTION AND THEATRICALITY**

For the past two years I had been exploring the relationships between the subject, photographer, camera and viewer. As my main interest in photography is portraiture, I have often found it difficult not to let my presence or that of my camera influence the behaviour of my subject.

While researching for my paper 'Investigating the gap between the Camera and the Subject', I studied the concepts of 'Absorption' and 'Theatricality'. Although both concepts have more in common with painting, film and theatre, they translate to the photographic medium when we think of the camera as a portal between the subject and the viewer.

Michael Fried describes the theatricality of the genre of portraiture when he wrote,

> "More nakedly and as it were categorically than the conventions of any other genre, those of the portrait call for exhibiting a subject, the sitter, to the public gaze; put another way, the basic action depicted in a portrait is the sitter's presentation of himself or herself to behold. It follows that the portrait as a genre was singularly ill equipped to comply with the demand that a painting negate or neutralize the presence of the beholder." (Fried, 1980 : 109 -110).

The same is true of portraiture in photography.

After reading books on theatricality and absorption[12], I started looking at this gap between what the subject shows and what the camera sees and also how the presence of the

photographer and camera can change the actions of the subject and finally how the audience interprets the final image.

Why do we want to look different in photographs? Or why do we want to appear different? Why do we change in relation to the camera?

I wanted to revisit the 'RePose' project and do something new with it for my final MA assignment. I wanted to intensify the gap between the subject and camera but at the same time have both absorption and theatricality in the image. While sleep acted as an agent of absorption, the act of dressing up for the camera gave me the element of performance.

I thought about what my research questions would be.

What is the role of the subject? What is the role of the photographer? What is the role of the camera? What is the role of the viewer/audience? And ultimately how are the relationships between them defined?

I was also interested in how the subject presents itself to the camera and the idea of dressing up and being presentable and what being seen differently means to the subject. My aim in answering these questions was to break through the deceptive veil and find a way to merge the two concepts of theatricality and absorption.

I began by finding examples of this dual identity of the subject and the coexistence of this duality in an image. I found it in the works of Thomas Struth, Rineke Dijkstra, Philip-Lorca diCorcia, Roni Horn, Bettina Von Zwehl and Francesca Woodman (See figures 26-31)[13].

As Diderot insisted, that

> "underlying both the pursuit of absorption and the renewal of interest in the sister
> doctrines is the demand that the artist bring about a paradoxical relationship between
> painting and beholder – specifically, that he find a way to neutralize or negate the
> beholder's presence, to establish the fiction that no one is standing before the canvas"
> (Fried, 1980 : 108)

I had already achieved this fly-on-the-wall effect but the images still lacked aesthetically. I also wanted to remove all traces of environment, which meant that the bed had to go. Using a black background I not only created the distance I needed from the comfort and familiarity of the personal space but I also exaggerated the tension between absorption and theatricality by making the image more sublime and fantastical. I used the clothing not as a fashion statement but to intensify the feeling of discomfort and the jarring absence of the clothes one would

normally wear to bed. The dress is used purely to woo the camera. It is used not for internal comfort but for external scrutiny.

The one and only critical note that I received from reviews of the images I produced was that they lacked traces of sleep. In other words, the subjects looked posed, as if they were pretending to sleep and that I had failed to capture the temporal aspect of sleep.

However I insist that the purpose of the project is not to photograph sleep, but to use sleep as a catalyst to arrive at the state of absorption, which I am satisfied I have achieved.

Michael Fried describes the depiction of sleep in paintings like Joseph-Marie Vien's 'Ermite endormi'(Fried, 1980 : 29), Jean-Baptiste Greuze's 'Un Enfant qui s'est endormi sur son livre' (Fried, 1980 : 32) and after Jean-Baptiste Greuze, the 'La Tricoteuse endormie' (Fried, 1980 : 33) as

> "an absorptive condition, almost an absorptive activity, in its own right."(Fried,
> 1980 : 35)

(See figures 32-34)

To me sleep wasn't the focus but a state in which the subject was both present and simultaneously absent. It was for this reason that I changed the camera angle and placed it on top of the sleeping subject, looking down, to give the viewer control over the subject and empower the viewer to be both spy and judge.

I have finally resolved all my issues with the project, be it technical or aesthetic, and now have a coherent piece of work (See figures 35-44).

Having produced these images I have answered the questions I had set myself but more importantly I have succeeded in building my own relationship with photography through the process and I am confident that the images are both aesthetic and true to their purpose.

FOOTNOTES

[1] Giovanni Pascoli, in Quattrocchi and Harvolf 1987, FMR

I came across this quotation in a paper written by Jacque Lynn Foltyn entitled 'Corpse Chic'.

Dr. Jacque Lynn Foltyn, in her book 'Fashions: Exploring Fashion through Cultures' (Jacque Lynn Foltyn, Inter-Disciplinary Press, Oxfordshire, UK, 2012) carries a version of the 'Corpse Chic' as a Chapter.

[2] This Los Angeles, USA based company offers varied services tailor made to fit each person's particular suicidal needs. It also offers discounted services for couples and advance planned suicides as well as budget suicides for low-income clients under the heading 'Specials'. The webpage can be accessed through this link: http://www.attractivecorpse.com/

I have still not determined if this is a legitimate commercial website or a hoax. But the very idea is intriguing to me and made me think about the possibilities of such an enterprise as a subject for my project.

[3] Audrey Linkman's 'Photography and Death' outlines various photographic practices around funeral rituals across America from the late 1930's to the present. The funereal portrait was significant to the grieving process as well as a keepsake or a form of memorabilia of the deceased. Such commissioned photographs have also been part of my own culture in Goa, India.

[4] These and several other images I found on the Internet redirected me to the concepts of death and fashion. America's Next Top Model's Season 8, Week 4 Episode, entitled 'The girl who changes her attitude' (IMDB, 2007) has ten models pose as murder victims in crime scene photographs (See figures 06 & 07). Another series of photographs by photographer Steven Meisel appeared in Vogue Italia's August 2010 issue. Inspired by the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico in April 2010, it depicts Supermodel Kristen McMenamy dead on a beach (See figure 08).

[5] For this project I fixed four flashlights onto the hands and feet of a dancer and took multiple images of her dancing in the dark. I stitched these images together using video software. The resulting video had an instrumental soundtrack and went along with a voice over commentary. The project was for an assignment 'What is an image?' and by using a narrative to give shape to the images of light swirls I wanted to create the impression that the image had to be imagined by the listening to the story (See figure 09).

[6] To establish the relationship between the medium (camera) and the photographer, I took images of a sandwich over a period of two weeks. As the sandwich deteriorated I recorded the process chronologically matching how the camera has evolved from film to digital and another series of pictures in reverse chronology, from digital to film (See figure 10).

[7] 'Pixelated' was a serendipitous occurrence, which came about from the combination of my obsession with television, a poor Internet connection and the bizarre world of 0s and 1s. The more I looked at the screen grabs I took of pixelated video, the more I realised the potential to present these images as an artistic regrouping of colour and form. To me they transformed from being the mere glitches they were and became visually beautiful and stimulating. The images question the notions of identity and challenge the viewer to see beyond what is shown. Each image struggles to be seen differently while refusing to let go of it's inherent coding. The resulting form is a melange of the original and the alter ego (See figure 11). I used the images from this series for the Interim Show 2013.

[8 & 9] In Roland Barthes's 'Camera Lucida', he speaks of two effects a photograph can have on the viewer. The first 'studium' is an almost general interest around the subjectivity of the photograph, but without any special connection to it. Whereas, the second – 'punctum' he defines as "that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)" (Barthes, 2000 : 27).

[10] While Barthes maintained that the photograph's authenticity cannot be challenged as it is evidence of an event that has occurred, Christian Boltanski's installation 'Detective' as well as several of his other works indicates that images can be deceptive in their lack of information subsequently providing no evidence at all.

[11] Some of the key works I looked at were Ryan McGinley's stunning series of naked people in caves, which was published in 2009 by Mörel Books, London under the title 'Moonmilk'. Spencer Tunik's installations in various landscapes inspired me to look at non-traditional ways of creating landscapes. Sally Mann's 'What remains' is another series that uses the subtlety of wide angle to draw focus to the subject. Ori Gersht's series of images of cherry blossoms ties landscape and history in a way that linked time, space and event (See figures 12-15).

[12] Michael Fried's explorations on theatricality and absorption in several of his books namely, 'Absorption and Theatricality – Painting and Beholder in the age of Diderot' (Fried, 1980), 'Art and Objecthood' (Fried, 1998) and 'Why Photography matters as Art as never before' (Fried, 2008), became the basis for my research.

[13] Thomas Struth's 'Family Portraits', Rineke Dijkstra's Beach Portraits, Philip-Lorca diCorcia's series 'Heads', Roni Horn's 'You are the Weather', Bettina Von Zwehl's 'Untitled' (See figures 26-30) were all series that emphasized what Diane Arbus describes as "gap between intention and effect" (Fried, 2008 : 207) whereas Francesca Woodman's self portraits were deliberately posed specifically for the camera (See figure 31).

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