



REfigured

Ken Gonzales-Day
Shen Wei
Tom Jones
Zoe Crosher



Index

Introduction	1
Essay	3
Ken Gonzales-Day	7
Shen Wei	15
Tom Jones	25
Zoe Crosher	33
Acknowledgements	39

Front cover images courtesy of

Zoe Crosher and Perry Rubenstein Gallery
Tom Jones and Sherry Leedy Contemporary Art
Shen Wei and L.A. Galerie Lothar Albrecht
Ken Gonzales-Day and Luis de Jesus Los Angeles

University of Nevada Reno

Introduction

Sheppard Contemporary and University Galleries is pleased to begin the 2013-2014 gallery season with an exhibition of photographs from some of the cleverest photographers working today. The four contemporary artists whose work is included in *Refigured* explore the photographic archive as a means for exposing the uncertainty of narrative, questioning our understanding of history, engaging fantasy, writing new histories, and documenting what never was, but could have been or what might yet be.

From fashion photographs to identification card thumbnails, humanity is obsessed with imaging itself. Important questions arise when we think about how images of humans are made and how they are archived. Does an airbrushed senior portrait give a truthful representation of an adolescent teen? Can an image of protesters at one demonstration be used to exaggerate or underrepresent another demonstration on the nightly news? When we look at the photographic archive, can we accept the images it holds as authentic, representative historic documents? If yes, what perspectives, worldviews, and agendas contribute to the production of these images? If the answer is no, does this awareness of truth's instability open up possibilities for reinterpretation of the archive and of our understanding of what truth is?

I encourage you to consider this exhibition and share your responses with us on our Facebook page (Sheppard Contemporary and University Galleries), through Twitter (UNRGGalleries), or on a print or digital feedback form available in our galleries and on our webpage.

This exhibition is supported by Nevada Arts Council (NAC), Department of Tourism and Cultural Affairs (DTCA) and the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA); Associated Students of The University of Nevada; College of Liberal Arts, School of the Arts, and The Department of Art, University of Nevada, Reno; Marion H. Baker Fund for the Arts, and Friends of Sheppard Contemporary. Sheppard Contemporary and University Galleries is pleased to partner in strengthening the arts in Nevada for the greater prosperity of our communities. Great states have great universities and great universities have great art galleries. We're glad you've decided to visit Sheppard Contemporary and University Galleries and we hope you'll visit again soon.

Paul Baker Prindle
Director, University Galleries
15 August 2013
Reno, Nevada

The Fantasy Potential

Carmen Winant

The artists in this exhibition—Ken Gonzales-Day, Shen Wei, Tom Jones, and Zoe Crosher—each challenge how fantasy can operate within the photographic archive. They variously depict subjects realizing their exotic fantasies; embody their own deep-seated yearnings; and manipulate the surface and content of found images in order to tease out the collective impulses, delusions, and traumas surrounding raced and gendered bodies. As a whole, they ultimately complicate the terms of fantasy, refuting the lingering expectation that photography, “documentary” or otherwise, is an agent of indexical truth. Instead, each artist claims a stake in the medium’s potential to explore the uncertain and unreliable realms of imagination and projected desire.

In an interview earlier this year, the artist Zoe Crosher addressed this impulse directly within her work, saying of her *Additive Dust Series (GUAM 1979)*, featured in this exhibition: “From the beginning, I knew this was not a biopic. This is not about who she actually is—it’s all about different levels of fantasy. The fantasy she has of herself, the fantasy I have of her, the fantasy she has of me.” For this project, Crosher repurposed an existing archive of one woman named Michelle duBois who

photographed herself thousands of times throughout her adult life. The printed images—eventually covered in dust and re-photographed by Crosher as the final object – are imbued with a want to be seen that is distinctively feminine; duBois alternates costume, make-up and kittenish poses, framing her seductive body as a potential site of anonymous desire. Crosher’s use of accumulated dust references analog photographic process (the material sticks to negatives in the darkroom, impeding the ability to “see” the printed image), but that’s not all: by forcing her viewers to look through a screen in order to decipher the image beneath, the artist perpetuates a continued cycle of unfulfilled expectation.

Shen Wei’s series of self-portraits, *I Miss You Already*, likewise engages the language of constructed, fantastical reality through portraiture. In this case the artist draws on his own body, posing nude or semi-nude in lush, natural scenes and blank interiors. Although other subjects appear in the photographs, Wei (who lives in both Shanghai and New York City) seems entirely alone in these fashioned realities. There is in fact a consistent sense of teetering—between sensuality and coolness, intimacy and aloneness,

subjecthood and objecthood—that injects friction into the sentimental title. Who is the “narrator” of that statement, and who is its intended recipient? How does the word “already” rise up from lowly adverb to forefront questions about chronology and duration? Finally, how would the sense of desire shift if the images did not picture a young Asian man, his body ineluctably tethered to the fantasy of the romanticized Orient? By subverting our expectations of the subject’s own agency, Wei’s photographs point to the contradictions in how we assume and abdicate subjecthood.

In his body of work *Encountering Cultures*, Tom Jones pictures a ritual fantasy outside of, and yet profoundly associated with, his own body. The series, which features largely Caucasian historical re-enactors posing as Native Americans in a ritual called “Rendezvous,” is an acute examination of the reclamation, re-assignment, and ultimate romanticization of indigenous culture. In making these images, Jones, who himself is of Ho-Chunk heritage (a tribe originally from the territories now subdivided as Wisconsin, Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, and Minnesota), upsets the historical precedent for documenting Native-American culture as we know it: pictured from the outside-in. Rather than the anthropologist or cultural tourist, it is the person of indigenous descent who documents the outsiders as they attempt to play-assimilate into a background that is decisively not their own. The re-enactors are shown dressed up as Indians and fur traders (as have many in

popular culture from the Boy Scouts – who play games such as “guard the chief” and “stalking Indians” – to Cher’s hit 1973 song *Half Breed*) with their camps pitched and furs hung behind them. The exotic fantasy of otherness becomes disrupted by Jones’ newfound authorial vantage point.

In his *Erased Lynching Series* (2002-2011), Ken Gonzales-Day draws from a different, if not unrelated, fantasy: the desire to erase or forget trauma through substitution or erasure. Bearing a title that reflects the artist’s process, the photographs are sourced from archival postcards and materials of lynchings (primarily of Native Americans, Asian Americans, and Latinos) across the American West between 1885 and 1935. Rather than confronting us with the found imagery, Gonzales-Day does something craftier and more confounding. Each victim, along with the rope that has been used to lynch him or her, has been removed in post-production. All that often remains of the image is the crowd of Caucasian faces—pale complexions often made even whiter by the illumination of a harsh flash—and the tree or pole from which the bodies lifelessly hung. It’s a simple gesture, and yet one that confers tremendous weight; by shifting the emphasis from the corpse to the perpetrators and mechanisms of the act, Gonzales-Day challenges the erasures in our own collective memory, reminding viewers of our own willingness to forget.

In this sense, Gonzales-Day challenges the viewer to “work-through” in a similar way to a patient of psychoanalysis. Only by remembering and confronting

the traumatic evidence, Freud would argue, do we instate the will to recover and, eventually, a will to remember.

In their experiments with projection and authorship, Wei, Crosher, Jones and Gonzales-Day engage the pointed mechanism of fantasy and imagination in order to better understand their immediate realities. They are seeking not to expose any great “truth” so much as its means of intricately layered construction. This is, after all, what distinguishes fantasy from the escapism of fiction and makes it so dangerous in the first place: fantasy has the profound potential to point to how subjective reality itself is endlessly deconstructed and refashioned. In order to enter the realm of imagination, after all, we must have a cogent understanding of the history we are escaping from.

Carmen Winant is an artist and arts writer. She is a frequent contributor to Freize Magazine and Artforum.com.