LYNNE ROBERTS-GOODWIN

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Remote-Half-Light

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Remote–Half–Light

by Charles Green

Lynne Roberts-Goodwin shows that the documentary present of photography is the perfect medium for fixing the liminal. With their crepuscular montage – or, more correctly, meltdown – of fields of vaguely recognisable details from pre-modern European painting – Roberts-Goodwin's photographs induce a radical vertigo inseparable from a submergence and redefinition of personal consciousness.

If the illumination that is supposed to accompany such transport is absent, it is because Roberts-Goodwin's photographs simultaneously engage with precise issues of transparency and blankness – the same themes that obsess but elude contemporary abstract painting. Roberts-Goodwin re-invents painting through photography. The works in *Remote–Half–Light* seem to self-destruct as we look – her immaterial quotations either fracture before one's eyes, as if at a touch, or gel into the aqueous opacity of dreams and blood, into horizontal bands of red. Eloquent and breathtaking in their disintegrative sophistication, Lynne Roberts-Goodwin's photographs are an improbable combination in contemporary art: they are both gorgeous and important.

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The lunar quality of Roberts-Goodwin's dark, luxuriant images is confirmed by the series' title, *Remote–Half–Light*. Her pictures carry the same nocturnal charge as Cindy Sherman's 1992 photographs of dummies engaged in sex acts. In both cases the photographs are clearly framed by the eyes of a photographer who is a woman, even though the activity of shooting a film is conventionally celebrated, in both popular culture and in feminist art theory, as a quintessentially masculine activity. Both Roberts-Goodwin and Sherman have us stare transfixed at scenes that would usually be regarded as constructed for a male gaze – the former at reproductions of Old Master paintings from museums (the originals invariably commissioned by wealthy male patrons) and the latter at re-enactments of pornographic poses (consumed by almost exclusively male readers). Fascination is accompanied, however, by our awareness of looking

through female photographers' eyes. Jan Avgikos notes that this ambiguity, in the case of Sherman's mannequins, is both seductive and confrontational.[1] The same edgy encounter, reinforced by a similar virtuoso control of *mise-en-scene*, is replayed in Roberts-Goodwin's painted details.

Admiring weird dummies engaged in sex or several-times removed, decayed details of paintings is, as Avgikos observes, an unlikely activity. In each case what we mostly see is the reproduction of an act or an original. This monstrously but unexpectedly exaggerates the sensation of scopophilic complicity and, in Roberts-Goodwin's works, blows out each photograph's aura to a halo of meditative amplitude like that found in the paintings of Spanish artist, Zurburan. At the same time, *Remote–Half–Light* is a catalogue of languid gestures and liquid timelessness – in other words, of a language of plenitude expressed through monumental forms and grand gestures. *Remote–Half–Light 5*, 1994, is composed of a sumptuous gigantic form, like a monumental cloud, which only just coheres into a torso and an arm silhouetted against a dark blue sky; this is the only photograph of the series that does not contain a horizontal band of red and thus, I think, the eroticism of this image is far greater and less unchecked than its fellows. It alludes to the calm, semi-surreal Mediterranean fantasy of Matisse's *Luxe Calme et Volupté*, to Cézanne's *Bathers*, and to the Classicist figure compositions of Poussin but specifically to this fantasy when it appears at a remove, as in the Swiss landscapes of Ferdinand Hodler or the eclectic neo-Classicism of Puvis de Chavannes. The same torso reappears in *Remote–Half–Light 6*, 1994, irradiated with the glow of a horizontal gold-red bar.

Both Roberts-Goodwin and Sherman dramatise the insight that, within late capitalist culture, woman is nothing but "image". The photographs of *Remote–Half–Light* are, like Sherman's works, emanations of profoundly shared fantasy (fantasies about art instead of fantasies about women). On the other hand, they are also manifestly constructed *impersonations* of character and art history. To see Roberts-Goodwin's photographs as *about* the fetishisation of the gaze seen in appropriated fragments of art history (framed by a discourse of the gaze alluded to by juxtaposition with the science of optics, present in the form of "chroma bars" positioned underneath each photographic image), is to miss the powerful nature of what she actually does. Roberts-Goodwin projects a countervailing and essentially unacademic moral of interdependence, which can be explained as follows. Rosalind Krauss notes that, contrary to accepted critical opinion, Cindy Sherman did not "act" different characters: she manipulated graininess, colour cast, framing, picture ratio and cropping – in short, aesthetic means remarkable for their

brevity – with extreme precision to establish her repertoire of character. As Krauss says: "The role [of one of Sherman's characters] is instead a function of the cinematic signifiers."[2] Similarly, in Roberts-Goodwin's photographs, the image's meaning is the result of the formal photographic signifiers – the viewer projects his or her imagination into these loaded signifiers and onto a narrative content of remarkable blankness. It is as if Roberts-Goodwin was really Richard Prince in disguise, but with class and attitude.

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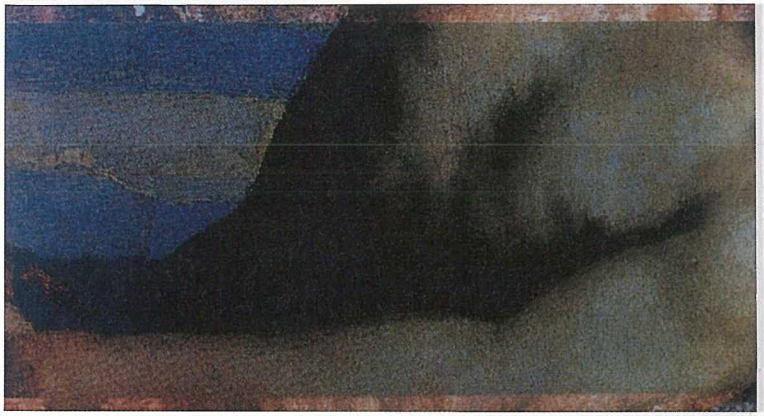
The aura of handmade objects and, particularly, the charisma of the painted mark survives reproduction. Lynne Roberts-Goodwin preserves, transfers and embalms this plenitude in photography, exaggerating its presence by an association with the Arcadian cultural metaphors mentioned before. She pushes her images to their limit - to the absolute but still unyielding edge of their legibility, magnifying their texture until figuration disintegrates into chemical-induced Pointillism. The closer the photographs career towards incoherence the more moody and resonant – and thus more lucid – they become.

This association of opposites – of ineluctable recognition (like a logo) in tandem with pure, non-motivated, "scientific" forms – suggests the artist's close interest in the issues of contemporary abstraction. The photographs' appearance is synthetic, the installation and choice of images are indexical and, finally, painterly references are juxtaposed with chroma bars, which suggest a colour space devoid of handmade origin. Normally, the postmodern qualities of irony, pastiche, humour and cynical detachment are mapped onto figurative images; the project of much late 1980s painting was to transpose these qualities into abstraction, and to synthesise them with a genuine resuscitation of authenticity and originality. This was, almost without exception, a failure because the medium of painting did not accommodate such multiple codings. An empty faith in the meaningful nature of manual process replaced more rigorous 1980s' debates about the politics of representation. Roberts-Goodwin restages two debates: firstly, the familiar ability of painting to signify authenticity is mimicked in photography, an accomplishment not dissimilar to the revival of a corpse; secondly, the subject vanishes.

Remote–Half–Light borrows from Classical culture a profound sense of submarine crisis that we never knew was present; it shares this, and its appropriation of Mediterranean motifs, with Jean-Luc Godard's 1965 film, *Pierrot Le Fou*. Godard's film is late modernism in breakdown. Its

'Remote-Half-Light 1' 1994
Type C — Colour Photographic Print on Aluminium - 1.2m x 2.4m



'Remote-Half-Light 5' 1994
Type C — Colour Photographic Print on Aluminium - 1.2m x 2.4m

coherence is deliberately fractured; so is that of *Remote–Half–Light*. Firstly, continuity is disrupted. Roberts-Goodwin's multiple exposures mirror Godard's choppy, staccato editing; figures surface in the photographs and the film where they should not. Shots of Godard's hero, Jean-Paul Belmondo, and heroine, Anna Karina, fleeing Paris alternate with shots of them planning their escape in Karina's apartment. Another lover, Frank, surfaces without warning and she merely says to Belmondo "I'll explain." She never does. *Remote–Half–Light* and *Pierrot Le Fou* constantly compel the viewer to rebuild the narrative. Secondly, continuity is arbitrarily over-emphasised. In Paris, Karina kills a man with scissors that surface again, later in the film, as the weapon with which she murders a midget. Belmondo reads a passage on Velasquez from a book by Elie Faure at the start of the film; he seems to read or carry books from this point onwards all through the film. Roberts-Goodwin's horizontal bands of red do not coincide with the contours of forms or figures: they bind disparate conjunctions together in a coagulated flood of colour; they diminish difference so that images are stripped down and reappear like signposts. It is no accident that the least abstracted photograph, *Remote–Half–Light 1*, 1994, is also the least legible, and its arms and drapery oscillate between pattern and the organic appearance of natural phenomena like sea-life. It resembles the nightclub sequences at the start of *Pierrot Le Fou* – a series of fairly static tableaux bathed in the coloured light of red, green or yellow filters. Godard's characters talk to each other in stilted Pop Art monologues and look as if they live in an aquarium.

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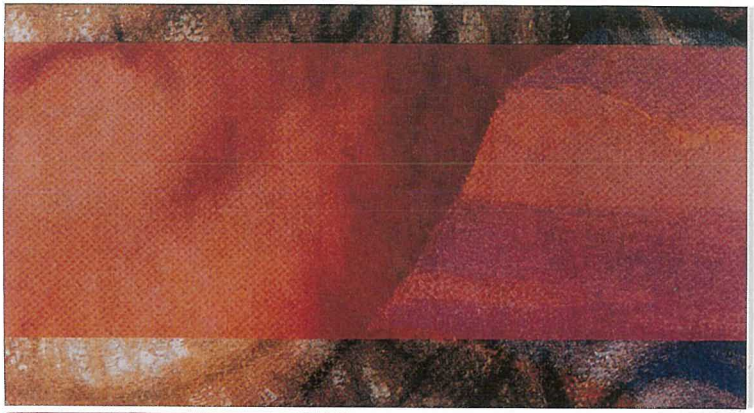
In his often-cited essay, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse", Homi Bhabha identifies mimicry as the key strategy of colonial discourse through the identification of examples from colonial Indian culture.[3] Citing Lacan's suggestion of the effect of mimicry and camouflage, Bhabha notes that the effect of camouflage is not a harmony with the surroundings, but a strategy of blending in – of disguise – with the background. Mimicry is a compromise: it is a representation of difference that is itself a process of disavowal; it is the representation of a double-bind. To be effective, mimicry must continually produce slippage: "almost the same, *but not quite*."[4] The imperfect imitations of the colonial subject disrupt the authority of colonial discourse and displace fixed identities; this insight is now familiar in art theory.

Roberts-Goodwin's sources are reproduced imitatively, through multiple photographic exposures, and therefore bodies, arms and animals appear, as they did in her 1993 series, *Phantasm*,

as resemblances rather than as structures in space. They combine seamlessly to offer an experience of smooth space and travel without landmarks: they are constituents of non-striated close vision. These partial images are themselves a type of camouflage, like animal markings, because they blend into equally articulated negative spaces without any transition. This mimesis is brilliantly superficial. Resemblances of absolute brevity are imposed on the crystalline, mineral skin of the mural print. Transpositions and montages made by mapping one thing onto another allow image and surface to preserve their distinct identities, whilst coalescing as a work of art. Animals, for example, can be mapped onto humans by tattoos (some of the most popular tattoos are dragons and peacocks) so that the features of one are forever coloured by associations with the other. The mapping of a tattoo does not cancel out the character of the surface onto which it is drawn – the skin – that is itself already an even more complex design. The skin, whether tattooed or not, is a border – a point where translation occurs. The skin is a map that faithfully charts the muscles, bones and blood underneath its surface. The lines on fingertips are an accurate signature, and are used by police departments everywhere. As well, depending on your beliefs, the fate and character of each body's owner can be read through an examination of the lines and colours on the skin, through techniques such as palmistry. The information on such maps carries the potential to be deceptive, just as designs drawn onto the skin can be immediately seen as maps of uncertain provenance or utility, although they certainly carry a personal narrative history. When the skin is pierced or marked, the possibility of active, creative misreading occurs as a kind of natural *midrash*.[5] A tattoo is a map on the body – a record of somewhere else superimposed on an already existing complex of sign systems and information, one set of lines abutted against another. In *Remote–Half–Light*, this natural and deviate process is recapitulated in the mapping of art onto the photographic print's gorgeous skin.

If tattooing is subject to the obvious conventions of indelible body drawing – firstly, they are badges or flags of outsider group membership; secondly, they offer a literal kind of reinvention of the self through art – then they also suggest another possibility – third, that there is a narrative between a specific chosen visual proposition (the tattoo) and a collector (the skin's owner).[6] Flayed skin is collected by certain renegade connoisseurs of tattooing; nothing, however, remains of the all-important narrative between the tattoo and its owner. Take the design from its context and the story (literally) dies; this is the subject of one of Titian's last paintings, *The Flaying of Marsyas*, c. 1570-76. Removed from its origin and stripped of its medium – the body of painting – each image in *Remote–Half–Light* is set adrift.



'Remote-Half-Light 6' 1994
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FOOTNOTES

[1]Jan Avgikos, "Cindy Sherman: Burning down the House", *Artforum*, 31/5, Jan. 1993, pp. 74-79.

[2]Rosalind E. Krauss, "Cindy Sherman's Gravity: A Critical Fable", *Artforum* 32/1, September 1993, pp. 163-164 and p. 206.

[3] Homi Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse", in Annette Michelson (ed.),*October: the first decade, 1976-1986*, Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1987, pp. 317-325, p. 318.

[4]*Ibid.*, p. 321.

[5] See Marianna Torgovnick, "Skin and Bolts" *Artforum*, 31/4, December 1992, pp. 64-65.

[6]See Deborah Irmas, "Drawn and Colored", *Artforum*, 31/4, December 1992, pp. 62-64.

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