Olympia’s Boys, 2000, archival digital C-print mounted on aluminum
Courtesy Robert Miller Gallery, New York

RENEE COX
THE BIG PICTURE
Shelly Eversley
What comes after post-modernism? Renee Cox. If modernism signals an awareness, and then an unconscious distancing of time, and post-modernism reflects fragmented, multiple identities, then a post-post-modernism would represent a reconciliation with insistent distinctions among time, space, and identity. Depth could appear on the most superficial surfaces. Cox’s photography calls to mind an ideal, one that has not yet been acknowledged in real life, but in the mind’s eye, in the moment after post-modernism, it sees. Take for example, Cox’s Olympia’s Boys (C-Print, 2001). In the image, which stands more than eleven square feet, a nude Cox reclines on a chaise lounge while her two sons stand behind her. All three subjects look into the camera lens and, unequivocally, into the viewer’s gaze. The image of a life-sized black woman in the nude posed as Muse invokes the viewer’s cravings for sex and power, while the boys, only partially black, heighten the effect. The boys appear at once as noble guards who protect the sexually charged woman and, at the same time, they seem innocent witnesses to the viewer’s gaze.

That the photograph’s presentation of color, density and desire (both pornographic and regal) suggest also that the people in the picture might actually move, might actually stand up and walk off the wall, removes any uncertainty that the staged scene could also be real. The reconciliation that takes place in Olympia’s Boys is the ideal that happens after post-modernism. Unreality seems reconciled with the real, and oppositions such as Madonna/whore and Black/White no longer seem fixed or exclusive. It suggests something entirely new since the awareness of boundary crossings is not only palpable, but also confident and even comfortable.

Perhaps it is the confidence, not the black female photographer’s allusion to Manet’s Olympia, that disturbs so many critics’ unwillingness to see. The New York Times, among others, has referred to Cox’s work as opportunistic, self-aggrandizing exhibitionism, yet in another view it could be called, positively, entitlement. The difference is that, whereas the latter suggests insecurity, a kind of stealing the spotlight. Since there is no theft in Olympia’s Boys (no one owns the image of a reclining nude), Cox’s rendering of her family in her series American Family, 2001, is, in some ways, a declaration of privilege. The theory of American ideals, such as rights and families, usually stand in contradiction; equality in theory is not always equality in practice. In the history of seeing and claiming to understand the significance of Black images, the theory supports what Claudia Tate has called "racial protocol," the insistence of realism’s correspondence to class disparity, racism, and stereotype. Concerning the practice of the image, deadlocks that can be broken firm, supple and precisely manicured Black female body outside the bounds of such theories and traditions. Similarly, half-white boys in head-wraps, carrying intricately carved wooden spears, do not evoke any idealized vision of Blackness. But the practice remains.

The photograph oppositions such as Black and White, positive and negative, travel further into the exclusive realms of theory and practice. Its reconciliation begins there, on the deepest level of theory and then rises to its most superficial level: the spear, head-wraps and even the manicure. The superficial surface is deep. The image resolves the argument begun by Adrian Piper and Cindy Sherman, who decades ago at the height of avant-garde post-modernity, sought, albeit differently, to make visible the intangible effects of fragmented identities. Here, the fragmentation has disappeared. The comfort with which the subjects look beyond the frame suggests a certain kind of knowledge, one that perceives and accepts the dissolution of meaningful difference. What the viewer sees is confident declaration. What the viewer sees is entitlement.

To see a nude image of a Black woman and her Black-White children in the grandest tradition of the Salon is to be willing to dismiss the hierarchal separations of race, gender and power. It is to be willing to accept the implications of epistemological rupture. As it relates to the nature and the grounds of knowledge, particularly as it refers to its limits and its validity, epistemology presumes to delineate aesthetic value and truth. Critics averse to American Family thus suffer blindness to a view of reality that undermines the solace afforded the status quo. "They cannot see the forest for the trees," as Rene Magritte made famous so long ago. They suffer what critic Michele Wallace calls a "critic in black visuality," an unwillingness to interrogate multiple and incoherent modalities. Olympia’s Boys makes vivid the simultaneous and volatile combinations of race, gender, sexuality and history to inaugurate another kind of knowledge, one that is willing to practice the theory of the most democratic ideals.

In their introduction to The Black Female Body: A Photographic History, Deborah Willis and Carla Williams describe a tradition that insists on a fragmented, contradictory visualiza-
tion of the black female body:

The larger society... thought it had no choice save to dissolve the perversity of the Black woman’s life into a fabu-

lous fiction of multiple personalities. They were seen as acquiescent Aunt Jemimas who showed grinning faces, plump laps, fat embracing arms, and brown jaws puffed in laughter. They were described as leering buxom wenches with round heeds, open thighs and insatiable sexual appetites. They were accused of being marauding matri-

archs of stern demeanor, battering hands, unforgiving gazes and castrating behavior.9

Willis and Williams argue that such aesthetic, raced and gen-

dered “hallucinations” have persisted in the American collective consciousness since slavery. This kind of “hallucination” is not only the “crisis in black visibility,” but also the “racial protocol” that renders the invention in Cox’s work difficult for so many to see.

Large scale photographs such as Olympia’s Boys, Cousins at Pussy Pond, The Kiss (high end digital video) and, even My Son, all 2001, invite the viewer to escape the confines of their his-

torical hallucinations and to escape the limits of tradition. The risk of such an escape, of liberating perception from myth, demands that the viewer confront the most salient aspects of post-modern fragmentation and critique and then surpass them. It requires, in effect, active participation in the acknowledgement of Renee Cox’s entitlement.

In Cox’s view, as evidenced by the gaze her work directs toward the viewer, the “fabulous fiction of multiple personalities” does not even matter. Or, more precisely, it has no effect on the confidence that lingers beneath that very multiplicity. Instead, the entitlement that looms large in scale dominates the viewing space so that all viewers must look at the big picture. If they see, they acknowledge one Jamaican-born, American-raised, black female artist who sees herself, and by extension, her American Family, made in God’s image. Consider, for example, Yo Mama’s Last Supper (2001), a precursor to American Family. There is nothing new about a photographic staging of Jesus’ final dinner except that this time, “Jesus” is a Black woman whose full-frontal nudity democratizes religion so much so that God could be a woman, and black. The revision that takes place in Yo Mama’s Last Supper undermines an epistemological image, not a religious belief. The theory that God actually created all human beings in His (Her?) image, that all persons are in fact a divine work of art, becomes the practice in Cox’s photograph. Thus, the controversy surrounding such reconciliation is banal. But the tradition of viewing the Black female body as a site of pleasure, danger and contempt is the epistemological status quo—even at this post-

modern moment.

It is no wonder New York City’s Rudolph W. Giuliani and leaders of the Catholic Church perceived the photograph as anti-

Catholic, a desecration of religion.5 Their problem is the blind-

ness that perpetuates hallucinations that insist on the primacy of myth. These hallucinations depend on a divide at the deepest level of thought: the discrete separation of mind and body, a par-

allel to what I am calling the alienation of theory from practice. What we see is a black body, a female body that, in contrast to the fully clothed men who frame Cox’s figure, arouses the senses. That arousal makes the viewer aware of his or her own physical-

ity and it effectively eliminates “intellectual” distance. Without that distance, the viewer cannot distinguish and separate his own subject position from Cox’s Jesus. The logic within the photo-

dgraph understands the potential for the Black female body’s betrayal by minds like Giuliani’s; however, it also sees beyond it. Cox’s Jesus offers a gaze that implies a mind within a body while it also encourages the viewer’s mind to acknowledge its relationship with the body. Yo Mama’s Last Supper practices the theory of intimacy between Jesus and his people; the viewer must accept the body not only as the physical representation of an ideal, but also as proof of the Passion. What’s at stake here is not merely the question of religious decorum. More importantly, it amounts to the question of Betrayal, the repudiation of the body by the mind.

In her essay, “Olympia’s Maid: Reclaiming Black Female Subjectivity,” artist and critic Lorraine O’Grady writes, “We do not yet have the courage to look.”7 Her point is that in viewing the Black female nude, viewers are prepared to respond to every-

thing else except for what they see. Take for example, Cox’s Cousin’s at Pussy Pond, a counterpoint to Manet’s Le Dejeuner sur L’Herbe (1863). At Pussy Pond, a real location in the bourgeous Hamptons in New York, Cox’s body replaces the white woman who sits nude amongst the two men, who in Manet’s pas-

toral, sit, fully clothed, in conversation. Their clothing and con-

versation mark a contrast to the naked woman who becomes not only the object of a sensual, masculinist gaze, but they also delin-

eate a distinction between “feminine” nature and “masculine” civilization. The distance between theory and practice continues in his rendering. Cox’s portrayal, however, erases that distinction by offering an image of a Black female nude amongst two, almost nude, Black men.

Because the racial identity, and thus the difference, of all of the subjects in the photograph signals a nostalgia for nature and not civilization, the viewer may be willing to imagine only a photo-

tographer who stages a scene in order to steal Manet’s spot light. But again, if the viewer has “the courage to look,” to see, finally, beyond the blindness of myth, they might see and feel the sensu-

ality of black bodies within the context of bourgeois civilization. The body might meet the mind. The viewer may have to rethink Cox’s photographic practice in order to acknowledge the theory that civilization, in practice, actually includes us all. In Cousin’s at Pussy Pond, Cox’s female object is also subject. Her pose, like Manet’s, faces directly the viewer’s gaze. But here in the photo-

dgraph, unlike the painting, realism supersedes abstraction. Cox’s figure, situated at a real pond within a realist construction, acknowledges the viewer in a manner that dissolves the theoreti-

cal separation between abstraction and realism, object and sub-
ject, mind and body. It is a post, post-modern moment. It is important to note here that race and gender make all the difference. By claiming O'Grady’s challenge to have “the courage to look,” the viewer can see finally an instance in which Black people—women in particular—assume the position of image-maker. There is no fragmented discomfort that renders the image unstable. The confidence and comfort in which Cox, as object, looks beyond the frame and into the viewer’s space is a radical declaration of entitlement. It is a new declaration of rights.

What does it mean that a Black female photographer and model presents herself and her work as simultaneously sensual and deliberate? As virtuous mother and sensual object, as universally American and particularly Black? It is a deliberate refusal of post-modernity’s fragmentations. There is no divide that separates the photographic object from the viewer’s subjectivity. The black body is, in fact, a central part of the canonical fabric of Western art. Moreover, the artist Cox, in this example, is the arbiter in the theory and the practice of image making.

The viewer may recognize the trope of tradition in her work, but to engage it he or she must acknowledge the innovation—the innovation that undermines the tradition that would determine the meaning and the significance of what she or he is willing to see. For instance, in My Son (gelatin silver print), the boy who stands draped in an amended version of the American flag suggests the most ideal principle of American identity. The single white star that stands out on the flag announces a certain individuality that, coupled with the seriousness with which the boy gazes into the camera, declares the acknowledgement of the future. The boy’s black-whiteness troubles the persistent racial divide that, in theory, should no longer exist. The scale of the image, which is literally larger than the boy himself, demands an engagement with not only the fact of his immediate presence, but also with his history. He comes from a black mother and white father, an American “tradition.” But in this instance his history emerges from the eroticism that renders The Kiss dangerously pleasurable and predictably taboo. My Son represents the moment after post-modernity since, as The Kiss demonstrates, it reveals the end product of theory at ease with practice, the body reconciled with the mind.

Black lips French kiss White lips. A tongue from those Black lips penetrates the White. The repetition in the fifteen-minute video that is The Kiss transforms the caress into a more blatant sex act. The White lips with mustache begin to look like a vagina, and the tongue a phallic penetration. Taboo rises to the surface of the mundane since the mind sees interracial sex, fornication, at the superficial level of a simple kiss. The video approaches the pornographic not because of the implied intercourse, but because of the visualization of racial and gender difference. The Kiss is a visual instance of heterosexual normativity, yet because the Blackness of the woman, who upon a prolonged witnessing, takes on a dominant position, the video disrupts tradition.

While the sex that follows after engagements such as The Kiss results in something as benign as an American Family, race and power render it forbidden eroticism. It implode distinctions between public and private, between professional and domestic so that within the context of the museum, the viewer’s body, like Cox’s subject, reunites with the mind. The movement in The Kiss produces physical sensation and, at the same time, it represents an instance of epistemological dissent, of confrontation with the Id. Here the woman is also a man, the man is also a woman; the innocent kiss endures to transform taboo into the realm of the everyday, of the domestic. My Son becomes proof of such acts of agency and desire. The American boy, scaled to engage the multiple prisms through which the viewer will look, demands acknowledgement. His nude body, draped with the symbol of democracy, becomes the realization of a distant theory. As the child within American Family, he is the multiple and seemingly incoherent modalities that come comfortably together. His presence, after all, is the difference between blindness and insight.

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Notes