

HOTSHOE

The Paul Kooiker book, "Heaven"

"Heaven" is a comparatively more sumptuous meal of Paul Kooiker's work, particularly when one contrasts the book with his previous strictly thematic volumes. Consisting of 494 Polaroids, "Heaven" announces that it is an especially reflective book in his canon. And it is, in several respects, featuring surveys of the different series projects he has undertaken, uniquely arranged and designed, achieving a kind of maximum impact of Kooiker's detached yet earthy aesthetic.

Kooiker: "The starting point of the book was to make a selection of the Polaroids I made between 2000 and 2012. Most of them are made between 2001 and 2004. I had to make a selection out of thousands of Polaroids. In that period I made a lot of nude studies in my studio; and I photographed my private life, and holidays with Polaroids.

I work together with a great designer, Willem van Zoetendaal, who is also the publisher of my books. We can also be very critical with each other. So what happened with this book is that I sent him almost daily Scans of six Polaroids from different series. Totally almost 800 Polaroids. Out of these series, he made spreads. He did a proposal and we discussed it, so finally we settled on 494 Polaroids. I think he did a great job; I could never edit the spreads myself in this way."

"Heaven" opens with Kooiker himself standing beside an open casket, near the body of his late father. Reminiscent of the thematically similar snapshots of Araki's late wife in a casket, and the concluding pictures in the wrenching books of photographer Seiichi Furuya, their photographs witness death with quiet formal intimacy, and shadings of sobriety. Kooiker's opening pictures depart from what we know about his work.

Kooiker: "The light in my studio has roof light, and when I was thinking about a title for the book, I tried to find a word that reflects that kind of light. But there is also a serious aspect to the title. The book starts with me standing next to the coffin of my father, who believed in heaven. Of course the title is also a bit ironic like most of my book titles."

Interspersed throughout "Heaven," are personal photographs of landscapes, cityscapes, makeshift pedestal tables for the models, chairs, and the signature empty rooms littered

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with discarded Polaroid strips. The inclusion of such images in a volume permeated by eccentrically posed robustly built women with flesh so palpably rendered that their bodies attain an artless poetic grandeur, enhances the casual abstraction underlying the book.

Hotshoe: “Do you insert the pictures of furniture, landscape, and architecture to disrupt the flow of nudes, or to broaden the visual scope of “Heaven”? Does the inclusion of such content contribute to a more abstract conception of the book?”

Kooiker: “Yes, but also to show the way I look at things, for example my interest in fountains can be as strong as that for the nudes.

I like very much to photograph my studio before a model arrives and also after the model has left I like to shoot the space. I am not interested in a single beautiful image; I always need more images to tell my story. Because of that I can then use images, which are wrong, ugly, out of focus, too dark, ...etc. etc. That’s exciting for me to play with the medium of photography and its borders, including the mistakes.”

Although obese women are often seen as pariahs in today’s fitness culture, Kooiker restores the primal quality of their powerful beauty with his persuasive methods, staging their bodies in site specific poses, that more often than not, are at cool remove from the cliché posturing of much erotica. His matter of fact, low-fi visual style is just one of the techniques he uses to get at the essence of his feelings toward the nude. Ironically, the visual beauty of the nudes done in this style resonates with sensitivity, visual surprise, and an odd rightness. Although the artist is not above creating an erotic picture, he enters this genre of depiction on his own terms, sometimes framing his compositions with a distance between the viewer and the exposed body, which often lies there like a slab, simultaneously a medical image and a sexual photograph, so that the feeling of visual gratification is delayed and dissembled in the same instance, evoking his complicated characterization of “the cliché of the nude.”

Kooiker: “I am very interested in the history of nudes, not only in painting, but also in writing, performances, films, etc. The use of larger women is not a conceptual strategy, but I am open to the various readings pertaining to my work. I am always the same photographer but I like to play with different styles in photography.”

Hotshoe: How do you find or select your female subjects?

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Kooiker: “I use amateur model agencies on the Internet.”

Hotshoe: Do your models simply assume specific positions naturally, or are they heavily directed until they take a position that looks the way you want?

Kooiker: “I direct them extensively.”

Kooiker’s aesthetic of the buttocks, and to a slightly lesser extent, of the breasts, are familiar stereotypes, and represent the locus of appeal in various forms of sensual taste. One can almost hear the vernacular remarks lewdly enunciated in the populist readings of his pictures. It is therefore, all the more fascinating culturally to see his work in the context of a gallery or museum show, where words such as “problematic” or “objectifying” are inevitably attributed to the fixated quality of his perception. Reading through some of his previous interviews, I have the impression that he expects, or even welcomes these stigmatizing terms, if for no other reason, than that this is the academic art language routinely deployed toward art that loiters in the hedonistic sphere, where his photographs exhibit their most controversial strengths.

Hotshoe: Is there an underlying fetishism in your choice of physical types?

Kooiker: “Sometimes.”

Hotshoe: Is your intention to pervert the audience into finding pleasure in the physical types that predominate in your work, or are you merely intending to complicate their perception of the female form?

Kooiker: “Both, I like to play with my audience, they have to think ‘what am I looking at, is it beautiful, ugly, sexy, medical, crime, porn,’ etc.”

Why Kooiker has been able to navigate his art within the art system is perhaps a conundrum, possibly the result of his focus on pure forms that still correlate with the reductive classical modernism of say, an Edward Weston or Muybridge, or the older more soulful less self-conscious examples in the history of painting. In effect, Kooiker is having his cake and eating it too; because the word “porn” is deflected or used in close association with the truer characterization of his photography as “art.”

Hotshoe: Did you choose your models as a conceptual strategy to avoid the prevalent body types that are seen as ideals in our culture? Do you think that your recurrent depiction of large or corpulent women gives a specific signature to your work?

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Kooiker: “I don’t know, maybe it does, but I am not busy thinking about the representative signature of my work.”

Kooiker’s recurrent strategy of averting the face when viewing the nude can be seen in a serial conceptual light, which likely enhances his structural imperatives, yet also imbues his nudes with a consistent inscrutability that prolongs the gazing into an artful endgame.

Hotshoe: At some point did you have an epiphany about photographing women, and you decided that the model’s face and personality were elements you wished to eliminate? Was your aversion to showing the face there from beginning in your photography?

Kooiker: “Yes it was always there. I like to show the way I look at things, to walk around and play with perception.”

Hotshoe: In your interview for “Used Magazine,” you state, “that a lot of photos end up in the trash so it doesn’t always end well.” Do the pictures that end up in the trash differ profoundly from those that work? Or is it the concept itself what you deem unsuccessful, and therefore the photographs aren’t right for your purposes?

Kooiker: “It is always about the concept.”