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MARIANNA ROTHEN // SHADOWS IN PARADISE

A red dress is lying like a carcass on the lawn. Shoes abandoned next to it; the chair tipped up. A discarded blonde wig no longer means anything – no longer screams siren or bombshell or sex; only emptiness. And the question of what happened here.

If the women in Marianna Rothen's earlier series (Snow & Rose and other tales) appeared like the characters in a hazy, beautiful fantasy, *Shadows in Paradise* sets their sequel in dystopia. The artist's show, which opened at the Steven Kasher gallery in New York, brings together over 20 prints as the culmination of two years of work. These photographs serve as the second tome in an idiosyncratic story of female sexuality, role-play and violence; a world in which highly-played femininity seems an increasingly dangerous game.

Yet there is nothing unattractive about horror in the eyes of Marianna Rothen. Her re-scanned polaroids seem to drip nostalgic glamour, their complexity masked by hazy tones and the beautiful subjects they portray. If the photographer's first series showed an obvious capability to create a compelling image, the work now has an intricacy and depth that cannot fail to intrigue. Many of the images are masterpieces in *trompe l'oeil*, mirroring reflections through other mirrors, shifting the most minimal of details in a sleight of hand that creates trepidation in what had before seemed only picturesque. Narrative runs through the photographs, continually shedding the happy façade of appearances until we are left with danger, the stills from a bad dream.

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Yet speaking to the artist, she seems less to consider the unnerving side to her work – which for her contains “politically, no thought” – than occupied by a process that involves a whole cast of imagined personas. These characters, incarnated by her friends and herself, are followed through from Snow and Rose to the uncomfortable maturity that smashes glasses and holds guns in *Shadows in Paradise*. These characters find easy comparison with a whole roster of Hitchcock blondes or David Lynch stars, yet the agency of the photographer, alongside her subjects, and one of them, creates an essential difference: a shifted sense of power.

Rothen spent seventeen years as a model, a period which she describes as being for the mostpart “subject to the male gaze”, compelled to “compromise myself, feeling compromised [whilst] growing up”, from the age of only 15. It is from this context that the subtleties of representation and control come to the fore. In front of the male lens, the pressure to become a “commercial, sellable” version of a person was continual; behind it, photography could be an antidote.

The camaraderie Rothen describes from these early days, taking photos with other models, is still present in *Shadows in Paradise*. A veritable cult of women, the ‘bombshell’ can now represent for herself – is allowed to feel, whether that is sadness, trauma, or fear. No longer the shell-like character of ‘the beautiful woman’ that populates countless films, she is a individual surrounded by other females, each with every suggestion of independent histories and complex mental states. All this within images that are each complex, aesthetic and compelling. If this is Rothen’s first solo show, we can only dream of what’s next. And probably, you should be too.

The book for ‘*Shadows in Paradise*’ is published by b.frank books, available at <http://bfrankbooks.com/product/marianna-rothen-shadows-in-paradise>

The exhibition was curated by Cassandra Johnson and is on show at the Steven Kasher Gallery until April 15th.

Images courtesy Steven Kasher Gallery.

With thanks to Marianna

Feature written by Elena Larsson