

Malerie Marder  
Maureen Paley  
2 July-7 August 2005

### The State of Contemporary Desire

Malerie Marder's photographs of naked people in shadowy motel rooms are not exactly narrative. The figures hang around, as if in anticipation of sex, but seem principally occupied with posing. While Marder's earlier nudes were often fraught with psychological tension, this set of figures seem more detached, too cool even to consummate their languid attraction. Marder shot the four images exhibited, part of an ongoing series called *Inland Empire*, in motels around Los Angeles. These are not the generic motel rooms of the economy business traveller, but the seedy-chic motel rooms familiar to us from movies and magazines.

When their gazes are not obscured by tousled hair, the figures stare off into space. Two of the four images show a woman standing beside a man reclining on a bed. In one, Marder herself poses between the legs of a recumbent man, the fingers of one hand resting on his leg. This pose lends the image a touch of intimacy, a slight charge of eroticism. The lurid surroundings overwhelm this subtle gesture, with a purple quilted bedspread, fake stone wall and red lights. The other figures in the series seem even more isolated, drenched in ennui. A well-built man in his late 30s or early 40s stands alone in the middle of his room. Like a figure in an Eric Fischl painting, this nude is a kind of awkward specimen, his physique catching the cool light that shines in the window from the desert beyond.

Marder has stuck close to the photographers she studied with at Yale in the 1990s. The show's overall staginess and kitschy décor points to Gregory Crewdson, the moody atmosphere to Nan Goldin, and the hollow drama, frozen in perfectly modulated light, to Philip-Lorca diCorcia. I draw these comparisons less to imply that Marder is derivative, than to note her cultural currency. She weaves references from art world and popular cultural sources to create an alternate world at the cusp of various genres—horror, indie, fashion, porn—while also drawing on the tradition of the nude. While the nude is about beauty, desire and the struggle with ideal form, it is also a traditionally academic mode, often invested in artistic one-upmanship and visual namedropping.

For the most part, Marder uses bodies, including her own, that are young and slim, if slightly more "normal" than those presented in advertising. In the most interesting of the four photographs, the young couple on display do not fit this body type. With matching dye jobs of blue black hair over bleached orange underlayers, this pair of tattooed teenagers bring a welcome whiff of subcultural sincerity into the mix. The freckly white girl has pointy pierced nipples and wears her hair in bunches. The floppy-haired boy is darker skinned, with folds of flesh on his torso. This couple, at least, do not have the toned bodies of models or actors, but their slumped postures and vacant eyes tell us nothing about their relationship or circumstances. As with the rest of the series, this image seems less about connection than about style and self-presentation.

Five years ago, I published an article in the American journal *Afterimage* discussing Marder alongside fellow Yale grads Katy Grannan and Justine Kurland. I expressed concern that these artists were exploiting their own youthful appeal as well as that of their subjects. I found their work mildly distasteful in its deliberate embrace of tropes of

male voyeurism, and opined that this group were doing themselves no favours by building their careers principally on images of naked girls. I implied that this “panty photography,” as I dubbed it, would age badly, that a little way down the line Marder and her peers would find themselves past their own nubile prime, making pictures that looked like yesterday’s soft-core pornography or perfume advertising. Clearly, I underestimated the capacity of this generation of photographers to develop and nuance their projects into a genre of its own (should we now call it “advanced panty photography”?).

I also underestimated the international art world’s appetite not only for nakedness, but also for images that overlap significantly with fashion photography. In this context, Marder’s work sits comfortably alongside that of some of Maureen Paley’s other artists: Wolfgang Tillmans, and the collaborative artists Muntean/Rosenblum who make drawings and paintings from fashion sources. One important aspect of this fashion reference in Marder’s work is that it implies a different kind of desiring gaze—that of the woman flipping through a magazine, projecting herself into the clothes, accessories and scenarios depicted. In this dynamic the female figure in the photograph is not just the passive receptacle of the male gaze but a stand-in for the female viewer, who is motivated not so much by lust as by envy.

Am I just jealous of Malerie Marder? I don’t think the envy evoked by these photographs is mine alone; Marder’s work trades skillfully in the currency of advertising, fashion and film images designed to make us feel wistful longing for something just out of reach. For some, these photographs may inspire a kind of tenderness and longing. Some may be seduced by the images’ careful construction and sophisticated recycling of clichés. These photographs are revealing about the state of the contemporary nude, and perhaps even about the state of contemporary desire. Yet to me they are somehow disappointing, like fashion photographs without the clothes.

Lucy Soutter

*Source* 44 (Autumn 2005), p. 54-5