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MALERIE MARDER

ON THE MISE-EN-SCÈNE OF HER WORK

By AÍDA RUILOVA

Even while still a student at Bard College in upstate New York in the late 1990s, under the tutelage of photographer Stephen Shore, Malerie Marder had settled upon the subject that has remained her focus for the last 15 years. In carefully composed environments, framed by the room as much as by her camera, Marder portrays her family, friends, acquaintances and hired models mostly in the nude. Yet, while fascinating to the viewer as much as to the artist, nudity, flesh, the body and its form are not necessarily the object of one's gaze in her pictures. Narratives arrive, seemingly proposed as much by what is undetermined by the image as by our own imaginations. What is not there and what is not expressed by these bodies compels us to speculate about relationships, dialogues, internal monologues, what came before or after, but never about its meaning. Marder's images are events, even though nothing happens. Therein lies an uneasy modernity of soft form and unknowing conditions of the flesh. Their virtuosity and status in the canon of contemporary American photography are assured after so many years of precise analysis in her task, since it lies in the decision of what she omits and in what she reveals.

Here, Marder is interviewed by the New York-based filmmaker and artist Aída Ruilova, and talks to her about her process, her *mise-en-scène* and her debt to her former tutor at Yale University, American photographer Philip-Lorca diCorcia. Ruilova and Marder met at SMAK in Ghent for the show *Casino 2001*, where Marder was “blown away by Aída's singular vision”. They remain close friends and contemporaries.

Aída Ruilova: We once bonded over our love of Virgin Airlines. I think we both agree there's something sexy about that New York–Los Angeles flight; the neon lighting, the dance music and the TVs. It's comfortable, which makes me think about the interiors and ideas of comfort and discomfort in your photos. What do these spaces mean to you? Are you trying to make the viewer feel at ease or purposefully anxious? *Malerie Marder:* With the exception of immediately climbing under the covers, once a person disrobes they're often fairly cold. The light I use helps keep them warm since it's a warm HMI and it stays powered like a small sun. There's a natural tension between the person and the room, or a couple and the room. Their amorphous bodies are in contrast to the geometry of the space and their nakedness is unusual. This is purposeful. I don't like cushy and oversized furniture, I like furniture that feels sculptural and I like to play with that tension. Generally I veer towards an underlying feeling of discomfort but nothing too overt. For example, when you walk into your house at night and all the lights are off and you make your way in the darkness, the rooms are familiar yet feel strange and alienating. For me the interiors are the other person in the picture and it's not just about palette; they have a psychology of their own. I don't think I've ever been particularly good at putting a viewer at ease. I think I associate this with childhood and there's something about my pictures that naturally mimics my state of mind. I would love to be at ease with the world but I can't imagine it as a permanent condition unless I was lobotomised. *Aída:* I love the photo *My Mother and My Boyfriend* (2000); there are a few photos of your boyfriend nude with your mother. It reminds me of those naked portraits from the 1970s of a mother and her child nude together. There's an innocence to those photographs but also something that feels slightly wrong or off. There's a perversity in this idea of photographing your boyfriend nude with your mother, almost a cult-like quality, in the sense that boundaries of sexuality have been stripped away. How did they come together for you? *Malerie:* My ex is an actor, and at the time we were together he had the enthusiasm of a recent convert, and we were both excited by the prospect of playing with boundaries to form a weird fiction. The first time I photographed my mother and him naked, my mother stormed off. Not exactly a success, but I liked the electric triangle that was created between my mother, him and me. Later, I purposefully



Malerie Marder, *Untitled*, 2000

arranged each shot so that their eyes never met, so they were contained in the same frame but mentally trying to escape. I had originally shot in black and white and decided to switch to colour to make the image more present and confrontational. As the pictures progressed, my mother's relationship to the camera changed. She never fully lost her embarrassment, which I felt terrible preying on, but she understood the inherent harmless comedy in it all. I did think about family pictures when I was making those photographs and how generally

posed they are, but also the pictures you are referring to – those naturalistic, intimate moments. I think there's a feeling of forced intimacy that happens with my pictures of family; everyone commits out of love, and the result shows glimpses of that internal struggle. *Aída:* Flesh is everywhere in your photographs. People lie around naked in beds, on floors, in chairs... Yet I don't feel it's the nudity alone that lends to this strange eroticism that laces your images. There's an underlying violence in the frame, a stillness that alludes to a past moment, something not entirely alive anymore. Have you thought about this when making the photograph? *Malerie:* The most conscious I was of this relationship was for a specific picture titled *Past Present* (2007), which was a recreation of the aftermath of an accident from my past. Years before I had fallen through a trapdoor at a friend's house, nine feet down, into the darkness in the basement. My bruises were black. I had to soften them for the picture; they wouldn't have been believable on film. It sounds overly dramatic but I think for an image to be powerful it has to, in some regard, insinuate death. Photography by definition captures what is lost and gone and can't be regained. Ever since I've had my children I've felt time passing too quickly, and I realise worse, time has passed, and it's a chilling thought. The nakedness and eroticism that carry my pictures would be weightless without their submerged counterpart of death. *Aída:* There's a short film called *Blood of the Beasts* by Georges Franju that documents a slaughterhouse in Paris in 1949. It's really graphic and it's very hard to watch these animals being dismembered, but at the same time, the images are dream-like and so beautifully shot because it was shot in black and white. Franju said that if he filmed the same slaughterhouse in colour it would have been repulsive and the audience would have a physical reaction to the images. Is there a difference for you when choosing to shoot in black and white versus colour? *Malerie:* Yes, it's like choosing between two different realities. Colour for me is locked in the present tense even if it has allusions to the past; it is confrontational and garish in a way black and white is not. It allows you to see the individual more clearly as you can see if someone is blushing or bruised or riddled with acne. There's less hiding in colour. Black and white is more like a sensual memory for me and the people in the photograph become anonymous, less punctuated. I am in a lot of my black-and-white pictures myself, but you can't tell it's me because I'm hiding and concealed by shadows. That said, to quote Edward R. Murrow: “The obscure we see eventually. The completely obvious, it seems, takes longer.” *Aída:* Your new book *Camal Knowledge* features a correspondence between you and the photographer Philip-Lorca diCorcia. I love the photographs you both took on your phones and the visual conversation that comes through those images. How did the conversation come about? *Malerie:* When Philip was my professor at Yale, he had a mysterious, magnetic quality and “come close if you dare” vibe. His artistic genius was undeniable and of course I was intimidated. I remember he once told me I was good, and from him, this was gloating. When I was putting my book together, I took the risk of asking if he'd contribute and to my surprise he was eager. We both agreed that it should be an interview and that it should be unconventional and not pretentious. The actual correspondence was more complicated than what ended up on the page; pictures were often paired with words, but it was too confusing to reproduce exactly. It's a book inside a book. It was a touching experience and he helped me tremendously at a time I was (continues on page 249)



Malerie Marder, *Untitled*, 2005

THE KARL SISTERS

(continued from page 56) interesting when you know that 70 per cent of the human body is made up of water. You play crystal bowls in your sound baths. When played, what kind of frequencies do they emit? Have you seen the patterns they create in water? *TKS*: The frequencies of the crystal bowls can be understood as the major and minor notes of the musical scale, though each bowl generates overtones and certain waves of frequencies that our bodies seem to benefit from. The bowls, when played, vibrate significantly. This vibration is what is received and conducted through our bodies. In the Integratron, the vibrations are amplified to such a degree that people feel the sound moving through them. We haven't conducted experiments with the sound patterns in water inside the Integratron, but that would be fun. *Lisa*: I read that the director of Baltimore hospital's coronary care unit says that half an hour of classical music produces the same effect as ten milligrams of Valium. Though the direct insertion of food and other chemicals into our body is considered much more effective than the effects of sounds, in reality sounds enter the body much faster than most types of directly inserted chemicals. Could you talk of some of the physical healings you have experienced or witnessed through sound therapy? *TKS*: We've witnessed many people being relieved of chronic pain caused by everything from gun shots to broken bones to back pain. One older man visited us being dragged there by his wife, neither of them was interested nor a believer in sound therapy. They just wanted to see the building. When we played a crystal bowl for about seven minutes, he began to cry. Asked why he was upset, he said his fingers had been locked by arthritis for seven months and he sat there bending his fingers in disbelief. We've seen others be able to discontinue pain medications because sound gave them the same relief as drugs without any of the mental/physical side effects. There are no guarantees on how sound affects people, yet we've seen many cases of physical and emotional healing that inspire us to continue exploring its capabilities. *Lisa*: I find it interesting that when we are in a state of health we call this "sound" health. Edgar Cayce, the father of holistic medicine also known as the "Sleeping Prophet", predicted that sound would be the medicine of the future. Do you agree? *TKS*: Given that sound was a primary medicine in ancient past, it would be a return to what was already a known benefit to the human body. We'd encourage everyone to explore the sound/music that inspires them, and to test the theories of "sound" health. In our technology-based society we are kind of "tuned" to the world with massive amounts of images and data and high-speed communication. More and more people are choosing to find a way to slow it all down, stop it, in fact, and find an inner life as a balance. If you haven't yet experienced a didgeridoo healing, or a sound bath, or other types of sound therapy, you're in for an amazing experience that you'll certainly benefit from. We'd venture to say that you will enjoy it!

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(continued from page 57) particularly riddled with self-doubt. The back-and-forth felt like a great game of tennis; he served the ball knowing I could hit it back, but not without trying to wipe me off the court. *Aida*: I know you've been travelling to Rotterdam for a new project, please tell me about it. *Malerie*: The title of my new work is *Anatomy*, which is a body of work solely of women, specifically prostitutes from Holland and primarily in Rotterdam. Over a period of four years, I climbed vertiginous staircases, inhaled lurid scents, and faced down an implacable fear, my sheer good luck had kept me from being on the other side of the camera.

ISABELLA ROSSELLINI

(continued from page 61) animals are ready to commit suicide? And also some of these animals are sterile. In a beehive they are all females and all sterile – they're called the workers – and only one is having babies. Where does it come from this *esprit de corps* [laughs], this generosity? Darwin thought that the generosity you see in people can also be found in animals. Maybe these animals, even if they are very different from us, can give us a sense of where altruism began, because altruism was always seen by religious people as something given by God. And Darwin said, "No, altruism might also have a biological root and not just a spiritual-theological root." He died before he could study bees, ants. *Gini*: Is this long embroidered jacket you are wearing Indian? *Isabella*: Do you think this is all right? The coat is for the Long Island Railroad on which I came, and underneath I'm dressed for a gala, with this slightly see-thru top.

STEVIE STEWART AND DAVID HOLAH

(continued from page 64) Stevie made these Nijinsky-inspired trousers for me. The whole rebellion and look of the Ballets Russes influenced us and we went to ballet classes at Pineapple Studios and watched performances of ballet in London. So when Michael came to us it was, "Oh, wow! A real ballet dancer!" *Judith*: It is so interesting that fashion does not live in isolation but is part of so many things. I was looking through the Michael Clark book and it seems that he was pulling fashion, music and art apart and putting it on stage, and that is so inspiring. You were taking fashion to a completely different level as well during the 1986-87 season and you won the Bessie award in recognition of outstanding creative achievement for Michael Clark's "No Fire Escape in Hell" costumes. *BodyMap*: If you combine the elements you describe it becomes much more interesting. Collaborating with Michael has changed over the years. "Do You Me? I Did" in 1984 was the first, and it was very much "let's just try this and try that". The costume has to fit like a second skin, and over the years our work has become more specific to the look of the production, reflecting how Michael sees the body as a choreographer. His work has become much more controlled. It is grounded in traditional ballet mixed with his personal, very contemporary vision. He breaks the rules; the way the body tilts at the pelvis and the importance of the torso. In the early days, Michael loved wearing our clothes, but when we transferred some of our fashion ideas, like ribbed holes in places that he sometimes didn't feel comfortable with. So he then asked the dancers to make a list about what they did and didn't like about their bodies and we would design the costumes around that. Did they want an elongated leg or a longer body? So we catered for the dancing body in that way. *Judith*: The beauty of *BodyMap* surely was that hunger of youth, your excitement about the NOW and your creative collaborations with artists on the London club scene. *BodyMap*: They were all our contemporaries and it was like circles within the circles, from different areas of life whether it is music, or dance or fashion or film or whatever. We were all growing up together in this sort of rebellious melting pot and we would like to play hard. Leigh Bowery was about dressing himself, we were talking about an actual concept. But what we all really loved was creating something that was really individual to us, to London. For "Family" in 1986, we had our grannies, friends and children on the runway, Boy George too [with dresser Fat Tony screaming, "The Fat Queen won't wear anything. He's slinging clothes all over the place because nothing will fit him!"] We used to bounce ideas and get inspired by the fact that someone was doing something and doing so well in their area; Michael modelled in our "Halfworld" Autumn/Winter 1985 show and choreographed two major sections of our Spring/Summer 1986 collection "Isa Comet, a Star, a Moon, a Sun aura Raccoon...?" We would incorporate them into our world. We were making our own language.