

SEDITION



MALERIE MARDER
ANATOMY, CARNAL KNOWLEDGE AND SELECTED WORKS
in conversation with Holly Andres

HA *I'm looking at Carnal Knowledge and Anatomy and I'm curious to what extent the photographs are documentations of a pre-conceived vision in your mind. What sort of directorial control do you have in these photographs as far as the location and some of the interactions with the subjects or is your work more spontaneous?*

MM *It's more of the former, like pre-conceived documents as you put it. There is an element of spontaneity, but only after [the photograph] has been set up. It's all been thought out, even the angle of the camera is often preconceived in my head. I only have an idea of what I want to happen with the body of the person. That usually gives the picture an element that's out of your control, it's unexpected and it gives [the image] a different life. I think that in a collaboration there's an alchemy that happens. It's unconscious but there's that conscious quality where you're thinking about it over and over again. There are certain themes that crop up for me that I like exploring. With a lot of [what I've worked on] my imprint is there, and everyone else's that I've been grateful to have been able to collaborate with. I'll feel that way even if it's a picture of me. I'll put myself in an image, and I'll think I have to explore this on my own, but still, even then, there's something else that happens. I can't describe it. I DON'T TAKE TOTAL CREDIT FOR THIS STUFF. EVEN BY VIRTUE OF BEING ABLE TO DO IT, THAT ALONE IS A LUXURY. That I was able to overcome any resistances to making it internally, and externally, and that everything came together magically (though it doesn't feel like magic when you're doing it, it feels like work) is a luxury I'm so grateful for. I DON'T SEE THESE THINGS AS MY GOD- GIVEN RIGHT TO DO. I DON'T TAKE OWNERSHIP FOR IT. IT'S NOT SOMETHING THAT IS SOLELY IN ME.*

HA *Interesting. Can you talk a little bit about the difference between working with known subjects such as friends and family, versus some of the sex workers in Europe that are in this collection and how that impacted the energy of the space that you were shooting in and ultimately maybe even the work itself*

MM *Ultimately it's the same thing, there's not a difference. People make a huge deal about who it is on the other side of the camera. THERE ARE PEOPLE THAT MOVE YOU AND YOU DON'T EVEN KNOW WHY. IT'S MYSTICAL, IT'S WHO YOU HAVE AS YOUR MUSE AND IT'S AN UNSPOKEN CORRESPONDENCE. I was very close to my father*

.... I wanted everyone to know our relationship because it makes it more potent as an image. Maybe not, but I thought it'd give another dynamic to it. People latch onto those things but the real truth is the picture itself is what did it, he allowed it to take place, he was willing, just as anyone else is willing...by this total divinity these women allowed me to photograph them and a lot of the trust was there because they saw that I photographed myself. And the other thing is the pictures aren't like oh here's a person with their fly unbuttoned mockingly. The women could see that my pictures weren't sensational or mocking and that is not just an aesthetic difference for me. I want my pictures and for the people in them to be beautiful. I like to transform my surroundings (I think in some mystical hope in transcending them) and in the sex club I could have photographed them in an untainted light where you would have felt where you were more but I don't think the women would have wanted to participate. To me that's an aggressive position to take. I wanted it to be collaborative where we created something together. I wanted my pictures to transmit something only they could give me. Like a lot of overwhelming color in the rooms - I wanted to heighten that and not play it down, and have the aesthetic be the conduit in the images of the women. There could have been a completely different way of doing the pictures, utterly. They were hard working environments - I was like a break for them. It was upsetting. There's no doubt that it's upsetting. There was nothing illegal going on or [the owners of the club] wouldn't have opened the doors for me but obviously there's slavery that exists and that's not happening there, this is me looking into the most liberal society, this is legal and everyone's of age. Should this really be a choice, and how much choice is there? There's kind of a big question mark surrounding that. If you're trying to survive and that's your only means of survival is that really a choice?

HA *Yeah, I did a really extensive cover story for the New York Times magazine on the sex industry and travelled to various different locations and photographed sex workers, but photographed them fully clothed on a white seamless in a studio. It's one of those things that's hard to wrap your head around, an industry that isn't going anywhere.*

MM *To me the question was, will these women meet a violent end? Is it a dead end that they can't get out of? I felt like some of the women that I met will get*

out of it, there's a transition out and they'll find a way out. And others ... but no one asked me for their help or anything.. That's different from the US... there were people watching over them. It's tough. ...not just desperate, but also dangerous, so that's a scary thing. They're vulnerable. There was one woman that I really liked, she was older, and for her it was a choice, she had another job. But I think a lot of women fell into that [previous] category ... A lot of the women I shot were vulnerable.

HA *Let's talk a little bit about vulnerability in your work and how it's related to intimacy. Why are you drawn to that human emotion?*

MM *Once I was really upset about something, it doesn't matter what it was about, but I've been hurt and I said to my friend why am I in this position right now. I was given choices, I didn't have to follow this path. I could have easily done something else and been less vulnerable. And she said no, there's a softness to you and you don't want to give up on that, you don't want to lose that. And I think that that's true, and I'm drawn to people with that quality. It's funny, a lot of imagery in Hollywood of female empowerment (I loved Wonder Woman, I thought that was more layered, she had a love story and didn't have to close off her heart in order to be powerful ... there's a part of me that doesn't respond to that [representation of the empowered woman] because I don't believe it. That idea of an action hero turned me off - a one-dimensional quality. It's not that it's not fun to watch. But there's something about it, that coldness, I don't like it in women and I don't like it in men either. Let's put it this way, if it interests me artistically, it's only in response to it.*

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HA *That's an interesting interpretation of it, thinking of the power in vulnerability. Obviously you oscillate between black-and-white imagery and color. I'm curious about what each format either reveals or conceals in your work*

MM *I think that color is inescapably contemporary. You can make it dreamy, but it's definitely much more recognizable as reality. I think that with the anatomy stuff I was able to shift that a little bit even though they were all in color, I really tried to work on the value of that idea in my mind and really push that, and it's definitely possible in color but it's more difficult, whereas black and white is more mysterious, it's about sensual memory, very nostalgic and rooted in the past, past-tense. A famous filmmaker once said (I can't remember who it is, I'll have to check) that black-and-white is more real, you can paint fiction in a more believable light. There's an inherent lie to any of this, I'm behind the camera, I'm jet-lagged, I'm a stranger, I've just gotten off a plane and I'll be back on one in a few weeks, I'm passing through. So how do I make this moment mean-*

ingful? THAT'S THE LIE, COVERING UP EVERYTHING THAT GOES INTO MAKING THE IMAGE.

HA *Correct me if I'm wrong but I have a memory when I was in graduate school I think I read something about you and you were revealing this story. It was a female photographer who answered an ad in the newspaper to photograph this couple that was having an illicit relationship, like an affair in a hotel room....?*

MM *It wasn't exactly that, it was someone I knew from home, it wasn't an ad. I had a class with Stephen Shore and I didn't know what the fuck to do. I had quickly moved to the 4x5 because I had no relationship to the 35mm camera. Without knowing it I had already started thinking about aesthetics and how it transmits meaning. I didn't like the grain of the 35, I didn't like the shape. I didn't like holding the camera, I didn't like finding decisive moments on the street. I didn't know how to put those feelings into words but I knew it wasn't working. And with the 4x5 something changed for me. I remember I was shooting some nudes, and I photographed friends of mine in the dorm, it wasn't a great setup, and this woman who was like a sister to me called me and asked me to photograph her and her boyfriend. And it turned out that he was married and having an affair. So they asked me to come to the nicest hotel in the area and it worked for me because I was keenly unaware. I showed*

up with my 4X5. There were a lot of things that were different about it, one was that they were adults and they had a lot of backstory between them and it was a secret moment that I was made privy to, and I've thought a lot about that since then. PHOTOGRAPHING A SECRET, WHEN IT'S DONE RIGHT, HAS A GREAT ELEMENT OF MYSTERY. IT REVEALS SOMETHING, BUT IT'S HIDING SOMETHING ELSE. I was exposed to a lot that day, I was stoned out of my mind, I could barely operate the camera. I came away from it and when I was developing the images I couldn't believe I was going to show these in class. I was shaking when I put them up on the board for Stephen, because I think he had humiliated me the week before, but he thought they were incredible. It was one of those moments, it came to for me, I had found my subject. Finding that and the meaning that connects to it is everything. That was the moment that changed it for me, and it taught me a lot. But he (the boyfriend) asked for the negatives back and he burned all but one.

HA *So you don't have them anymore?*

MM *No, I just have one picture, one photograph of a photograph.*

HA *Wow.*

MM *They were really good. They're in my head.*

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