

ARTFORUM

OCTOBER 1999 \$7.00

I N T E R N A T I O N A L



THE EAST VILLAGE
1979-1989
THE RISE AND FALL OF
AN ART SCENE



OPENINGS

MALERIE MARDER

KATY SIEGEL

When I was eighteen I was asked to take pictures of a woman named Laura and her lover. She had been having an affair for ten years with a very powerful man. They had learned that I was taking an introductory photography course and suggested they come by for a visit. They drove eight hours and got a suite at the nicest hotel in the area. In hindsight, the end of this story is obvious, but at the time I was keenly unaware. I arrived at the hotel in the morning with my 4 x 5 camera that I had just received a demonstration of in class. I was ready to make pictures. They took off all their clothes and I was soon made privy to their kinky love affair."

Malerie Marder, as she tells it, arrived at her primal scene relatively late in life—and with camera in

hand. It's been ten years since the telling encounter, and if the sexually fraught images Marder continues to produce are any indication, she's still working through the moment. Graduating from arts-driven Bard College and completing an MFA at Yale last year, Marder has acquired a sophisticated education in photography. But it is the model of moviemaking as much as photography that has informed her approach, granting her the license to make things up, to direct rather than to document—or rather, to document a situation that occurred only because she wanted to take a picture of it. Marder puts friends and family members in settings and lets them "act," responding to what they do, adjusting

and correcting them. Building out of charged, real-world relationships, the situations are often deliberately uncomfortable and unfold in unfamiliar arenas, such as motels or the homes of strangers, lending her images both the heat of the subjects' chaos and the coolness of the artist's distance.

Film colors not only Marder's working method, but

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the final look of the pictures: They are suffused with a drama you rarely see in photography, which is so often the art of the everyday. These photographs have the artificial concentration of film stills; but unlike Cindy Sherman—the inescapable precedent for this



Left: **Malerie Marder, *Untitled*, 1998**, black-and-white photograph, 20 x 24". Right: **Malerie Marder, *untitled*, 1999**.



Left: Malerie Marder, *Untitled*, 1998, black-and-white photograph, 7 x 9". Right: Malerie Marder, *Untitled*, 1998, color photograph, 30 x 40".

sort of thing—Marder cares more about content than about giving a metalesson in representation. And her particular content, even when depicting a person alone, is almost always the romantic tryst, with all its psychological and photogenic intensity—love stripped of conversations about roof repair, or tepid emotions such as fond irritation or mild boredom. This dynamic is rendered explicit in a black-and-white photograph of a couple taken in the suburban New Haven home of Marder's landlord. The lovers twine on a rumpus-room couch, completely lost in each other, their faces obscured, excluding the outside world.

The newest photographs offer equally intense but more troubled and less classically romantic interactions. One pictures a naked man and woman against sliding glass doors in a modern Malibu house. Standing, the man arrogantly offers her (and us) the frontal length of his body, as she sits, curving in on herself, protecting her privacy. Their slick, oiled bodies and the warm, fleshy light, combined with his

In this ongoing series, writers are invited to introduce the work of artists at the beginning of their careers.

cheesy mustache and her long straight hair, give the photograph a '70s soft-core feel. The same sense of failed connection also haunts a more contemporary-looking image of Marder and her boyfriend, pinned against a red tile wall, she stiffening in his embrace: an X ray of a relationship, rather than a valentine.

Stranger still are the photographs of the artist's mother and the artist's boyfriend. In one, the middle-age woman perches primly in a model-home bathroom, while the naked young man peers longingly at her from a steamy shower stall. This is just wrong. Even without our knowing who they are, the couple is deeply creepy, as if conjured forth directly from Marder's subconscious. She is the missing link between these two people locked in queasy proximity, if not intimacy. A strong sense of triangulation pervades most of the photographs—unsurprisingly, the punch line to the original scenario was the couple's wish that Marder join them on the other side of the camera.

And it is this possibility, that she is a participant, or at least a collaborator, that sets Marder apart from so many other photographers. She manages to circumvent the predictable, voyeuristic quality to

which photographs are so liable, the look that NEA cause célèbre Merry Alpern exploited to such effect and acclaim.

Since Marder serves as our proxy, it's easy for us to fantasize that we're in the scene, empathizing, rather than merely watching. You can imagine how it would feel—what it felt like—to stand that way, to make that face, to lie alone in a hotel room, to wear your hormones on your sleeve like a raw, acned teenager. Still more universally, the clandestine affair in Marder's work could represent love itself, if a rather dark vision of love, abstracted by the anonymous settings and laid bare, reduced to emotions and bodies. Woody Allen once said that sex was only dirty if you did it right. Malerie Marder might say love is only wrong if you do it right—with lust, desperation, and alienating self-delusion—the way it first looked to her through the camera lens.

"A month after the pictures were taken Laura's lover demanded the prints and negatives back. I kept one print, but returned everything else. I've been trying to re-create those pictures ever since, simply because they were worth burning." □

Katy Siegel is a frequent contributor to *Artforum*.