

REVIEWS

## Malerie Marder

LESLIE TONKONOW ARTWORKS + PROJECTS

Fifteen years ago this spring, a group show opened at a little uptown gallery with a very long name. “Another Girl, Another Planet,” at Lawrence Rubin Greenberg Van Doren Fine Art, featured the work of thirteen photographers—twelve of them young women—who were disregarding the documentary functions of photography to create more cinematic constructions exploring drama, seduction, and sexual desire. Organized by Gregory Crewdson and Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn and accompanied by a short story from the novelist A. M. Homes, it was a lightning bolt of an exhibition, one that struck something deep in the culture, all late-’90s ambivalence and premillennial ennui. Few who saw the show then, provided they were won over by the work, would soon forget the image on the invitation card—a black-and-white photograph of a nearly naked teenage girl, limbs splayed on an inflatable raft, drifting casually in a swimming pool at night, totally indifferent to our gaze. Malerie Marder’s picture seemed to capture not only a haunting moment but also the future of feminism, which appeared confused, conflicted, quite possibly bereft of real politics but at the same time far more pleasure-seeking than its forebears.

Since then, the group of photographers introduced by “Another Girl, Another Planet” has largely broken up and fallen off the art world’s radar. Marder is one of the only artists from the original lineup whose work has grown and changed and remained in circulation. For the past decade and a half, Marder has been almost exclusively shooting nudes, but in this same period, she has executed an intriguingly subtle shift in both tone and subject. Much of her early work captures young, lithe bodies, often passionately or lackadaisically entwined. But the promise of romance held out by Marder’s pictures is often overwhelmed by danger, film-noir-style suspense, and the sense that the relationships she is capturing—for example in a picture of her boyfriend, standing in a shower, naked, gazing lustily at her mother, who is clothed and perched on the edge of the bathtub—are illicit, uncomfortable, and maybe even explosive. Marder has kept the core of her work autobiographical. She documented her first pregnancy in a series called “Nine,” from 2006, which she said “wouldn’t be a prosaic account of my belly growing but more of a hostage situation—like what the hell is happening here?” But she has also branched out from her own experience to consider women in the wider world. In 2004, she shot “Inland Empire,” a series of enigmatic and strangely enervating portraits set inside a string of cheap Los Angeles motels. In 2008, she began a more ambitious project focusing on prostitutes in Amsterdam and in a Rotterdam brothel.

Six years later, “Anatomy” constitutes both a book and an engrossing body of work, which filled Marder’s first solo show in New York since 2006, when “Nine” was shown at Lawrence Rubin Greenberg Van Doren. Twenty-nine photographs printed in a variety of sizes were pinned, unframed, to the walls of Leslie Tonkonow Artworks + Projects. The images are softly lit and jewel-toned, due to an obvious propensity in the profession of Marder’s subjects for sapphire-blue bedsheets, gilt-framed mirrors, and orange faux-brocade wallpaper. But against those backdrops are ungainly folds of flesh and variously damaged bodies, whether obese, malnourished, scarred, tattooed, distressed, diminished, underslept, or overworked. Marder’s subjects, who were paid 350 euros each to participate in the project, strike the familiar come-hither poses of a canned sexuality—sultry in #28 from the *Anatomy Series*, 2010, a vision of blonde ringlets and red lips, in soft focus behind translucent black drapes; shy in #9 from the *Anatomy Series*, 2009, in which a woman glances over her shoulder at Marder’s



Malerie Marder, #25 from the *Anatomy series*, 2010, ink-jet print, 13 7/8 x 20".

camera; and ecstatic in #25 from the *Anatomy Series*, 2010, featuring a woman in repose on a plush red couch, her head thrown back. Perhaps because the women sample so easily and crudely from a well-known vocabulary of gestures, they appear here somewhat awkward and sad, which underscores the fact that Marder is catching them in interludes, in the time between jobs, in settings that try (and therefore fail) to mimic spaces of real intimacy.

Although it could be mistaken for a very current visual treatise on the unkind plight of women’s bodies as they age, a process accelerated by the labors of these women, Marder named her series after Robert Burton’s brilliantly eccentric 1621 treatise, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, which was composed, in part, to alleviate the author’s own dark moods. Burton’s text is willfully irresponsible as medical research, collapsing folly, madness, and melancholy into a single disease afflicting individuals, kingdoms, and humanity in general. But it is erudite and eminently gratifying as literature. In a similar vein, Marder’s work might not be totally convincing as a critique of neoliberalism or of the claim that legalized sex work empowers women economically, but it shows an artist pushing the romance of her early work as far as it will go, and then finding the ruin that may have always been at its heart.

—Kaelen Wilson-Goldie