RICHARD LEAROYD: THE PORTRAIT VERSUS THE FIGURE

By

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Optical precision is an ideal place to begin a meditation on the unexpected ambiguities in the work of Richard Learoyd: The articulation of detail with which he renders his subjects can animate the gesture of a hand, the line of a neck, each individual eye lash among a sitter's lashes, the texture of skin. As the razor-sharp edge of a shoulder dissolves into a slow blur in the narrow distance, a sense of space comes to life. Above all, though, the sense of volume of a seated Learoyd figure is what poses the greatest challenge—and the most pleasing aspect-- to the eye, even as the mind comprehends the anomalous phenomenon of dimension on a surface that is incontrovertibly smooth and flat.

As vision technology becomes ever more refined in the 21st century— in particular, the illusion of depth and space in virtual reality imaging -- it is striking that Learoyd's entire body of work is made exclusively with the Camera obscura, a primitive instrument derived from an ancient perceptual discovery. As the prototype of all cameras, the Camera obscura replicates the architecture of the eye and demonstrates the very spectacle of sight. Through a pinhole opening into a contained darkened space —the equivalent of the pupil, say— the natural transmission of light projects an image of the outside world onto the opposite interior wall, elucidating the principle of vision itself.

Learoyd built a life-sized Camera obscura in his studio in London, a room within a room, and, within this custom-tailored structure, he explores the perceptual intricacies of a primitive concept that has time-traveled from the alleged Arab scholar who first recognized the projection of an image through contained light as early as 956 to 1038, to the first known inventor of the Camera Obscura, Johann Zahn, in 1685, and into the 21st century. To be sure, Learoyd's use of this primitive device is by no means an exercise in nostalgia; on the contrary, his exploration is nothing less than radical, a claim that may appear to be counter-intuitive, but by no means is it an overstatement. He has arrived at a unique perceptual calculus, employing a 750mm lens as the

pinhole of his Camera obscura —its magnification of subject fifteen times greater than what the eye normally sees; the image is projected onto paper approximately 50” x 70” in size; he has factored the distance between the lens and the paper within the darkened room, roughly the equivalent of using a 20 - 30 mm lens on a 35mm camera. “My camera, even though it is effectively a very wide-angle camera, has very shallow depth of field and no optical distortion,” Learoyd says. “This quality creates in the viewer a visual conundrum.” *(conversation with author, NY, July 23, 2018.* Indeed, he has identified a subtle perceptual characteristic of the medium of photography in his exploitation of the shallow distance between the pinhole-- or the lens-- and the projection of light that reaches the surface of the opposite wall. This shallow distance is fertile territory for Learoyd, a leap into hyper-realism as it intersects with the transcendental—what Minor White, the photographer and a founder of *Aperture*, tried to define in metaphysical terms about his own photographs: “things for what they are, and for what else they are.” (*footnote/citation to come)*

In the studio, Learoyd situates a subject in front of the lens. He works with the sitter to achieve the pose, the gesture, and the emotive attitude he is aiming for: “Where do you want your eye to fall?” he says, explaining what might go through his mind as he works with the model. “You have to think about the way a person's eyes travel across the surface of a picture. They're drawn to the head. They'll look at the eyes. They'll follow a river of focus down to wherever you lead them-- whether it's the hands or another part of the body…. It's like a little song.” *(conversation with the author, July 23, 2018 (00:42:00))*

When everything falls in place-- the model’s position, a facial expression, the quality of light-- he makes an exposure onto a 50” x 70” sheet of Ilfochrome (cibachrome) paper hung on the opposite wall inside the darkened room. “You’re making decisions about the tiniest things-- *miniscule*,” Learoyd said. “You know, whether the hair is better here or there. It’s amazing how the tilt of a head or the relationship of a nose to a cheekbone, how all those little things can change the meaning or the projection of a photograph.” *(conversation with author…)* As the model’s image is projected directly onto the photographic paper hung inside the darkened room, in the mere seconds of direct exposure, in the shallow distance between the lens and the paper, perhaps in the absence of any intermediary negative, a host of perceptual anomalies incubate.

The polyester-based paper, which is flat and sturdy, was designed for commercial use and sensitized for exposure to color transparency film. (Before production was discontinued in 2011 Learoyd bought up enough remaining quantities to last him years.) He feeds the large sheet of exposed paper into a "wet darkroom" processer through which the chemicals are applied with rollers. Eighteen minutes later, he can look at the results of the exposure and determine whether the elements of color, light, tone, line, angle, and texture have fallen into place as he had hoped. Ephemeral qualities, too, add up to something beyond the subject itself, including the ineffable property of depth on the flat surface that is unique to his work, a condition of perception invisible to us in the everyday reality of our three-dimensional world that emerges in his use of the Camera obscura and becomes evident in his pictures —the very reason to consider them radical.

Learoyd is known to make at times fifteen exposures of the same model, adjusting the pose almost imperceptibly, coaxing out the right emotional tone, until he recognizes a semblance of what he wants to achieve, each exposure followed by the eighteen-minute chemical processing interval. The evolution to a final image might take several days, as opposed to a traditional sitting in which a photographer makes pictures of the model in a sequence to decide from contact sheets or multiple frames on a computer screen on *l'image juste*. Learoyd's process is a laborious one in which he makes a print of each frame instead of a series of frames from a single session and, with a reservoir of patience, or resignation, waits out those eighteen-minute intervals and, then, adjusts the model accordingly for each subsequent pose until he gets the exposure-- the one-of-a-kind print—he wants.

In the history of photography, there are pictures that document the world by presenting *what* has been photographed—a battle scene during the American Civil War by Matthew Brady; a desert landscape by Ansel Adams; or a portrait of sharecroppers by Walker Evans—in which the photographer has observed and described an actual scene before the camera. And, then, there are photographs of a more perceptual nature that illuminate *how* we see—Edward Muybridge's studies of anatomical movement that unravel the mysteries of optical illusion; Lee Friedlander's re-organization within the picture frame of actual objects in the flow of daily life, showing us new ways of experiencing observable reality. **Learoyd's work is about *how* we see.** "It's a

transformative thing," Learoyd says about his use of the Camera Obscura, the room in which his images come into being, and the resulting ambiguities that attend the optical precision in his photographs of individuals. "It's not an interpretive thing. It's actually a transformative thing." (*conversation with author….)*

In other words, he is not only representing the model; rather, in the absence of an intermediary stage— negative film— and with the direct exposure in the fertile distance between lens and paper, a distinct characteristic of Learoyd's work-- perceptual ambiguity-- hovers between the photographic and what many people refer to as the more illusory realm of painting. "People describe my photographs as very painterly," Learoyd says, "when, essentially, they couldn't be any more photographic." (*conversation w author…)* His photographs do not manifest the properties of paint—brushstroke, texture, etc., although they do seem to underscore visual distinctions between painting and photography that, strangely, unite the two mediums in our minds.

Learoyd maintains a steady color palate that invokes the delicacy of light in, say, Dutch master paintings. Take "Erika," Learoyd's photograph of a seated woman wearing a blouse of intricately patterned white lace. It has the same formality, evenness of light, and stillness of "Portrait of Adriana Croes," 1644, by the Dutch master, Johannes Cornelisz Verspronck. Her "ruff," or starched collar, an adornment worn by Europeans in the 16th and 17th centuries *[confirm], is painted with a seamless precision of brush to canvas that parallels the photographic intricacy of pattern in Erika's lace blouse. Not only is there a similar self-containment of subject in both the painting and the photograph, but, equally, the stillness within the frame imbues both of them with a similar spiritual mien that spans the hundreds of years between one and the other. (*figures 1 and 2*)

Soon after Learoyd graduated from the Glasgow School of Art, in 1990, he was given an artist-in-residency at the Scottish Ballet. He set up his Camera Obscura, although it was not conducive to capturing the movement of the ballet dancer. He had always been interested in the stillness of painting and was just then looking at 20th century painters. "I was photographing anything other than ballet dancers," he said. "I was photographing William Blake's likeness as an idea of stillness, making replicas of Bacon paintings of Blake's head, or the late 19th century Degas

photographs of ballet dancers that had only ever been reproduced as negatives, and making them into positives." (*conversation w author…)*

At the time, too, he was looking for a way to circumvent the intermediary step of exposing an image onto a negative in order to make a print. He was compelled by the immediacy of direct exposure of an image onto a fixed surface, avoiding a printmaking process altogether. That immediacy is the ingredient that underscores in his work the dualities of optical precision and perceptual ambiguity. In that duality, along with the absence of grain it yields, Learoyd achieves something close to verisimilitude that we rarely see throughout the entire history of photography.

While it is not Learoyd's intention to make photographs that look like "painting," per se, his dialogue with painters is ever-conspicuous, the reference to the history of painting an active presence. A side-by-side comparison of Learoyd's photographs and the paintings of individual artists leaves the impression of a conscientious dialogue between them, with no intentional replication by Learoyd of their work. For example, a strain of the Pre-Raphaelite aspiration toward a spiritual ideal suffuses Learoyd's photographs of women, whose expressions invoke the emotive attitudes of so many heroines of English literature or poetry, whether Shakespeare's "Ophelia" or Alfred Lord Tennyson's "The Lady of Shalott." Both were rendered with tenderness and clarity by the pre-Raphaelite painter John William Waterhouse. In particular, the emotional tone of Learoyd's "Tatiana in Black Dress" echoes the melancholic tone in Waterhouse's "Ophelia," even though the composition and the narrative circumstances are entirely different. (*figure 3 and 4)*

While Learoyd achieves remarkable emotive presence in the women he photographs, they arrive at his studio as models for hire. For the most part, he does not have personal relationships with his subjects. His attention to the details, as in the placement of hands, the gesture of an arm, or the angle of the body, suggests a contemplation of the human figure as opposed to the characteristics of the individual. His photographs, then, straddle an important distinction between of the *portrait* and the *figure study*. And, yet, Learoyd takes the figure study a step further in pursuing a quality of emotion in each of his models. His subjects reside not as portraits of specific women as they do, at times, examples of emotional states, as in "Tatiana 1," conjuring

the photographs of Julia Margaret Cameron, another photographer who straddled a line between "portraiture" in her documentation of notable figures in arts and letters in 19th century Britain, and the use of models to interpret states of being, as in her photograph, "NAME OF PHOTOGRAPH," representing the Pre-Raphaelite ideals of her own artistic circle, in which the figure is bathed in a poetic light that evokes a distant history, a higher ideal. (*figure 5 and 6)*

Learoyd's "Large James" (p163) is an image of a seated male nude figure, his **arms** sandwiching his head on top and bottom as if like a vice about to squeeze it and turn it upside down. The gesture implies an existential condition of alienation or disorientation, finding parallel in the evolutionary transformation found in the paintings of Francis Bacon. In Bacon's "Study for Self-Portrait 1982," the artist paints himself on a chair floating in space, his head decomposing within the square frame around his head—not unlike the geometric shape formed by James's arms around his head. The idea of transformation takes on a literal dimension in the Learoyd photograph, a more metaphysical one in the Bacon self-portrait. (*figures 7 and 8*) That said, "Large James" registers not as a psychological portrait of the subject but, rather, as a figure study of volume in space, the relationship of one elbow to another, the hand as it dangles free, shape, line, etc. "Quite often when I'm making these images," Learoyd says, "it feels more like drawing to me." (*conversation with the author…)*

Learoyd's figure study, "Julie Vertical," and Lucien Freud's "Benefits Supervisor Resting" comes closest to a symmetrical comparison. (*figure 9 and 10*) Both render obese female nude figures with an examination of layers of flesh, of volume and weight. Learoyd bathes Julie in a subdued and hallowed light, while Freud displays the flesh as if under the glare of a lightbulb, with lascivious brushstrokes and an obdurate carnality. Each is a distinct example of its medium, the differences between the photograph and the painting highlighted in the use of almost identical subject matter

"After Ingres," **Learoyd**'s reclining nude, is viewed from behind, one hand falling like a still life over the edge of her waist, and whose opposite arm is bent with the elegance of Ingres' "Odalisque," to which, it is, in fact, an homage. (*figure 11 and 12*) While a reclining nude is the subject of both the Ingres painting and the Learoyd photograph, each one is distinct to the artist

who created them: The face of the Ingres nude is turned to look at the viewer with an expression of complicity in the suggestive acknowledgment of her nudity and all that the luxurious bed she is lying on entails; the Learoyd nude is a study of the contours of the anonymous female form in a meditative light that borders on the consecrated-- a still-life by any other name. The Learoyd nude becomes a symbol of the figure, as in all painting, beyond the model in his studio posed for exposure in his Camera obscura.

From the very beginning, the relationship between painting and photography has been a tortured one. Photography's invention in 1839 was concurrent with a shift toward realism in painting, but artists were not predisposed to exploring a new medium that provided a true-to-life image of the actual world; in fact, they grew indignant at the idea that a mechanical method of representation could be elevated to the stature of art. In 1862, Ingres was among the artists of his day who denounced photography, signing an official petition in Paris: "Let it keep its place," he said in a denunciation of any "industrial" techniques in the realm of high art, relegating it to the world of science, where, perhaps, it was less of a threat to his own genius at rendering the world with daunting optical precision-- in paint.

Sam Wagstaff, among the earliest private collectors of photographs and the man who, for better or worse, was responsible for establishing the art market of photography to begin with, did not always believe photographs rose to the level of art either. "Tell me what a Brahms concerto means, and I will tell you what a painting means," he said as a curator of painting and sculpture at the Wadsworth Atheneum museum in 1961, implying that a photograph is full of facts and a painting is a more inspired thing. "People confuse painting and photography," he insisted. "The beautiful photograph is almost invariably beautiful because of the subject matter. A painting is beautiful because of its form, its texture, its color." (*Florence Berkman, "Atheneum Curator Explains: Modern Art: A Visual Language," Hartford Times, November 25, 1961).*

Richard Learoyd is not the only camera artist—to use an inadequate contemporary locution if only to make a point—to register the expressive and transformative capabilities of photography with such potent resolution. Surely, though, his work renders any discussion about the value of painting *versus* photography to be irrelevant. In his images, the "subject" and the "image" are

inextricable, of equal weight. For him, it is a matter of a visual construction in which shape, light, color, tone, mood, space, and volume all dance on the surface of a single sheet of paper—nothing less than a perfect alchemy of perception, emotion, and significant form. To say that Learoyd's images can be breathtakingly beautiful does not undermine the larger ideas manifest in the work—the revelation of acute observation and the surprise of captured perception. If anything, their beauty is merely Learoyd's secret weapon.

New York City, November 13, 2018