

Purdy | Hicks

NEETA MADAHAR: FLORA
13 October - 11 November 2010

I'll be your mirror
Reflect what you are, in case you don't know
I'll be the wind, the rain and the sunset
The light on your door to show that you're home

When you think the night has seen your mind
That inside you're twisted and unkind
Let me stand to show that you are blind
Please put down your hands
'Cause I see you

I find it hard to believe you don't know
The beauty that you are...

...I'll be your mirror... I'll be your mirror... I'll be your mirror... I'll be your mirror...

I'll be your mirror, The Velvet Underground, 1966

Neeta Madahar has photographed seventeen close women friends in the style of 1930s to 1950s Hollywood glamour images. She worked with each of the women to achieve the look both artist and sitter wanted, and no effort was spared in terms of lighting, make-up, clothing and props.



HELEN WITH POPPIES



SHARON WITH PEONIES

Her sitters are in their thirties, forties and fifties and there is no soft-focus, or airbrushing, or use of Photoshop. Inevitably, there's a gap between what the Hollywood dream is supposed to deliver, and what's actually there in the photographs. And it's this shortfall that fascinates.

Amid the luxury fabrics and fur, the shimmer and sparkle, and the sumptuous colour, there is flesh that creases, crumples and overfills; there are knowing – 'lived-in' – facial expressions; the women's postures are sometimes awkward.

Inside so many women there's an acute sense of failure to live up to an ideal. It's a miserable distraction, and it makes monsters of us. Remember the step-mother Queen in Snow White:

“Looking-glass, looking-glass, on the wall,
who in this land is fairest of all?”

(Grimm: complete fairy tales, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1948)

Neeta Madahar's photographs play to this anxiety, catching us out as – more than likely – we compare our own appearance to her sitters'. And yet there's also the euphoria of escape. What surprise and pleasure there is in seeing these 'real' women who have been set free to play in this way, and who seem in command and at ease.

The artist's decision to emulate 1930's to 1950's glamour prompted some of her subjects to bring in props that belonged to their mothers and grandmothers. Each of the women was asked to choose a flower to pose with, and these too were often selected with their mothers and grandmothers in mind. With these *dramatis personae* invited to the ball, it's no wonder that there is such elation, such melancholy, such defiance, to be found in the stances and expressions of the women. In this respect I'm reminded of Jo Spence's photographs in which she dressed up and re-enacted the (prohibitive) presence of her mother.



SIAN WITH BLUEBELLS



LISA WITH PRIMROSES

Looking closely at the photographs you start to notice all the strings and wires. The fabrics have been strewn about and there are raw edges to the paper backdrops, too. It's finally all very homemade and altogether less iconic than it first seemed. The inner psyche – the ordinary extraordinary – has been at play and a mirror has been held up by the artist.

ANGELA KINGSTON, curator and writer

NEETA MADAHAR writes of this series

Various portraits taken by society photographers during the 1930s-50s such as Cecil Beaton, George Hurrell, Horst P. Horst and Angus McBean have been influential in the development of *Flora*. What is striking about these early works is their highly constructed nature coupled with the readiness of the subjects to cooperate in role-play. I am fascinated by the power and social dynamics of portraiture, especially when a degree of familiarity already present between photographer and subject shapes the evolution of the final image^[1]. The 1935 *Goddesses* series of colour portraits by British photographer Madame Yevonde has also been hugely informative, particularly the camp and surreal qualities, but at the same time, the *Goddesses* series is a point of departure for the new work.

Flora explores an extreme, stylised form of femininity and the associations between fantasy and female beauty. This area continues to be ripe for examination, especially given the ever-burgeoning pressure on the human body to be perfect and therefore 'unrealistic.' Central to my project is the rejection of conventional fashion models. Instead, I am more concerned with photographing mature women aged in their early 30s and upwards. A key element is to understand how an image is manifested when two friends, who share a degree of history, intimacy and trust, collaborate in its construction. For example, I have stipulated that the plants chosen have been used as women's names, but it is my collaborators who, for a variety of personal reasons, select the flora to be associated with. In many instances, friends have also suggested themes or emotions such as melancholy or innocence that they wish conveyed and this has directed the ensuing discussions between us. Each of the sitters was requested to bring an item of their choosing to include in their portrait thus integrating a tangible element of the partnership into the structuring of the compositions.

I am conscious that when a portrait of a woman is taken, it automatically enters into a dialogue with beauty and fashion photography and consequently, with issues surrounding digital retouching. The visual enhancements in this series have been restricted to those possible through make-up and lighting as well as the processes common to analogue darkroom printing. Shot with a large format view camera, aspects of the images are highly detailed. The choice of hairstyles and make-up, props and poses in addition to the technical aspects of making the images are considered with great care despite the photographs suggesting a more casual assemblage. Formally, the production of luscious, colour saturated prints is a deliberate means of inviting viewers into a closer scrutiny of the works.

Flora revels in a knowing playfulness about the projection of feminine identities within the parameters that constitute photography. To consider what it means to make images such as these in the here and now, it is apparent that the creation of a 'mythic' femininity was, is and always will be, intrinsically unstable. And that embedded within this acknowledgement; there is a longing for cohesion and simultaneously, the recognition of inevitable disappointment.

[¹] Joanna Lowry, 'Negotiating Power' in *Face On: Photography as Social Exchange*. Eds. Mark Durden and Craig Richardson, London: Black Dog Publishing, 2000, p. 11-25.

NEETA MADAHAR was born in London, 1966. She studied at Winchester School of Art, and in 2003 was awarded a Full Graduate Scholarship to the School of the Museum of Fine Arts and Tufts University, Boston. Solo exhibitions of her work have been held in Europe and USA, including 35th Recontres de la Photographie, Arles (2004, Selected by Martin Parr); Institute of International Visual Arts, London (2005); Fabrica, Brighton (2005); Oakville Galleries, Toronto, Canada (2007); Aspex Gallery, Portsmouth; PM Gallery, London; Harewood House, Leeds (2008). In 2008-09 she was awarded the Bradford Fellowship in Photography, National Media Museum, Bradford with a major exhibition of her work at the Museum in 2009. Public collections include Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University; Government Art Collection; Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art, Kansas City; Pallant House, Chichester; Santa Barbara Museum of Art; Victoria & Albert Museum.

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