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Reflets et empreintes

Angèle Verret, Galerie La Centrale, Montréal. 3 to 25 April 1993

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MONTRÉAL

REFLETS ET EMPREINTES

Angèle Verret, Galerie La Centrale, Montréal. 3 to 25 April 1993



Angèle Verret, 2 par 2. Acrylic on canvas; 213 x 163 cm.

The paintings of Angèle Verret explore the interaction of photography and painting and their methods of portraying the human body. Her use of photography is both direct and indirect. In some cases, the images have their origins in photographs which are incorporated directly into the paintings. In other cases, the imagery is taken from either photographs or other paintings or drawings. These latter images are then organized according to photographic principles. The certainty of representation present in both media is broken down through the painting process in order to portray the felt experience of the body.

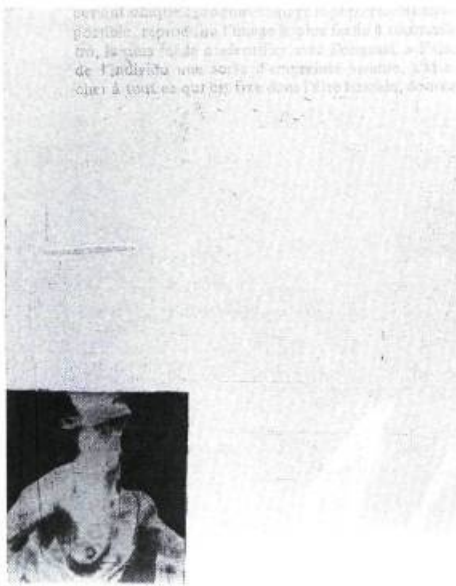
Verret's imagery is also an inquiry into the portrayal of the heroic, especially as defined by the male nude, which she renders in a style characteristic of 18th and 19th century academic studies where the body was idealized to convey nobility and grandeur. At that time, a canon of exemplary proportions (taken from Hellenistic and Roman examples of form, gesture and portrayal of action) was developed to embody the heroic. Verret reworks this imagery in order to counter this convention; her paintings express the vulnerability of the body and its changing relation with the world.

Historically painting and photography have been much concerned with the accurate depiction of reality. Both

media share a common interest in the rationalization of sight. The organization of vision through perspective is the basis on which the camera operates. Before photography's appearance, painters strove for a faithful representation of objects; their belief in pictorial precision led to the development of mechanical instruments and optical devices such as the *camera obscura*.¹ The discovery of photography, and its verisimilar representation of the world, was an extension of such beliefs.²

Verret questions the seeming correctness and authority of social ideologies supported by these beliefs in "accuracy". Her painting breaks down the objective stance that the photographic image has cultivated. The yielding qualities of paint allow for greater subjective exploration and interaction on the part of both artist and viewer.

Through this painting process, images disappear, while the defining form of the body becomes fluid and unfocused. The grounds of the work mix; background images inch into the foreground to achieve only partial definition. The treatment of the images makes them seem familiar, but their exact origins are unknown. Fragments of text, themselves indefinite, also appear in the work. In *Donné*, the ambiguity of the images counteracts the meaning of the text painted onto the canvas: "...devient unique pour produire l'image la plus ressemblante possible, reproduire



l'image la plus facile à reconnaître, la plus facile à identifier avec l'original."



Angèle Verret, *Donné*, 1992. Acrylic on canvas; 213 x 163 cm.

Certain precepts common to both photography and painting are used by this artist to question traditions of representation. In Verret's studies, the desiring and needful qualities of the body are made more acutely apparent. For example, there is a curious correspondence between the cropping of the human figure, which commonly occurs in photography, and Verret's "academy style" painting of fragments of torso sculpture. In these studies, the body is not represented in its entirety; arms, legs and heads are missing. In *Donné*, the painting of the female figure is segmented in the same manner; the body is cropped, leaving only the lower half of the head, the neck and breasts visible.

Photographic cropping, therefore, is a continuation of a tradition whereby the body, i.e., the very basis of experience, is fragmented for analysis and scrutiny. A further exploration into the relation of photography and painting occurs in *Reflét*. In this work, photographs of torsos, which are taped directly onto the lower section of the canvas, are reproduced as painting in the rest of the work. Yet both methods of reproduction rest on a presentation of a body section whose exact meaning and origin is unknown. The animated brushstrokes of the painting communicate the anxiety produced by such uncertainty, and the urgent need of the body to find a grounding in the world. In *Figure idéale de l'anatomie*, the exact repetition of the image in the three paintings is an allusion to photography's trivialization of imagery through repetition. The paintings display a male torso reminiscent of an antique sculptural study. The body is segmented for study and becomes, in the process, a mere brute indicator of mass, force and movement.

Throughout the show, the sexuality of the figures is understood through either rough indications or stylization. In the nude study, *Figure idéale*, the sex of the figure is obscure, yet the brawny chest and legs indicate that the subject is male. In *2 par 2*, the two main figures are presumed to be male and female. Yet the presentation of their sexuality is undercut by the handling of the imagery. Both the female and the male have raised their clothing to expose their legs, a sexual come-on socially acceptable with the former, but bizarre and inappropriate (given the norms of society) for the latter.

The heroic stance of many males figures is reminiscent of neo-classical traditions. To depict an ideal of

revolution or empire, the body was austere represented. Light and shadow patterns were handled to construct hard body masses; the resulting

taut musculature expressed uncompromising virility. The figuration indicated rigidity and armouring, qualities that denied the vulnerability of the body. Verret undercuts this modelling; in some cases, her figures lose their forceful definition and appear almost transparent. In others, the artist's brushwork is clearly evident and is used either to undermine a smooth, realist portrayal of the body or to grossly emphasize its physicality. For example, in *2 par 2*, on either side of the couple, a muscled leg is lightly traced, its presence unimposing. In *Figure idéale*, the idealization of the human form is subverted by its representation as a mass of heavy, coarse brushstrokes.

The yielding of the figures to the fluid quality of paint reminds the viewer of the impermanence and fictive qualities of imagery. In technologies such as photography and film, where less image distortion occurs, more credibility is given to their presentation of reality. Within any medium, however, the invincibility of figures is "...a general desire not to be reminded of disturbing possibilities inhering in the body."³ The history of the indestructible male body originated in heroic sagas and continues to be portrayed in current popular media. Viewers, through their identification with the hero, are instilled with their own sense of invulnerability and survive psychically the violence perpetrated against the body. It is Verret's intention to disturb this process and to present, instead, a view of the body open to experience and change.

ANDREA KUNARD

NOTES

- ¹ Aaron Scarf, *Art and Photography*, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books Ltd., p. 13.
- ² The histories of photography and painting are highly interactive, with either one at different times taking the lead in the claim to accurately depict reality. When photography was first invented, most artists considered it mechanical and without spirit. At Present, photography is considered the more truthful (that is, objective) medium.
- ³ John Fraser, *Violence in the Arts*, London: Cambridge University Press, 1974, p. 67.