

The Shadow Watcher- John Krakauer

## **THE SHADOW WATCHER**

John W. Krakauer

The naked human body is arguably the central subject of art and unlike other subjects it elicits varying intensities of erotic response. Aristotle stated that art completes what nature cannot bring to a finish. This notion of art striving for an ideal has been in continuous play for millennia but it raises a paradox when it comes to the erotic. This paradox can be introduced with a digression. In his novel "The Unbearable Lightness of Being", Milan Kundera suggests that men who pursue multitudes of women fit into two categories: "some seek their own subjective and unchanging dream of a woman in all women. Others are prompted by a desire to possess the endless variety of the objective female world". It should be apparent that these two categories, when brought to bear on the depiction of the female nude, are distinct from the idea of the perfect universal woman because every man has his own type and because all women are different. Thus in both cases, when it comes to the erotic, it is the particular rather than the general that is foremost. Kundera went on to define those men who seek out their one idealized woman as *lyrical* womanizers and those who celebrate the sheer diversity of female beauty as *epic* womanizers. Alvin Booth, in his photography, is clearly both a great lyrical and an epic womanizer, both Don Juan and Casanova. His gift is alarming in its intimacy because he lets us see what he sees. There is tenderness and a hint of sadness in his photographs of women, seen as though slumbering in a latex cocoon. It is a private vision shared, of girls suspended, as though caught after falling from a great height, an impossible, privileged view looking up at them from inside a mattress.

This essay will discuss some of the cognitive processes that Alvin Booth's photographs exploit in order to exert their effects. It is apposite that a scientific perspective be brought to his work. He loves his materials and his machines. There is something of the Nineteenth century Victorian inventor in him but the photos at times also evoke the sleek minimalism of a computer image. Thus he is difficult to place in terms of a genealogy of influence and his photographs float free of easy labels.

### **Erotic hyperstimuli**

In a provocative essay published in a special issue of The Journal of Consciousness Studies (1999), Ramachandran and Hirstein proposed a neurological theory of aesthetic experience. This essay offers a perspective on Alvin Booth's photographs as art. The central idea in the essay can be appreciated through the example of Tinbergen's ethological research on sea gull chicks. Tinbergen found that a chick induces its mother to regurgitate food by pecking on a red spot near the tip of her beak. Surprisingly, a disembodied beak alone will do the trick. Most pertinently, a very thin long stick with three red stripes is *more* effective than a real beak. The conjecture as to why this happens is that this is a "superbeak", which stimulates form-recognizing neurons even better than a regular beak and a stronger signal is sent to limbic areas. In this way, a super stimulus induces greater excitement or pleasure than the regular stimulus. Ramachandran and Hirstein then say that if seagulls were to have art galleries then "long stick with three stripes" would

fetch millions. Thus what artists do is create hyperstimuli, objects transformed so as to elicit stronger responses than ordinary objects encountered in everyday life. Exaggeration of an image can occur along a multitude of dimensions but clearly how it is to be achieved with photographs differs from how it can be achieved in painting. In painting, almost anything goes whereas in photography there are constraints within which the artist must work.

Alvin Booth is creating woman as photographic hyper-stimulus: he uses shadow, contrast, texture, posture, and composition to enhance the female form's capacity to cause limbic excitation. Before discussing how some of these effects may be working, a few sentences here in anticipation of the objection that art is not supposed to arouse the viewer, that's what pornography is for. It is indeed the case that sexual arousal is not the true artist's goal and that photography poses a greater risk than painting for causing such arousal. However, erotic response and longing are not synonymous with arousal. Pornography is easily recognized; its telltale signature is a heavy tedium. Alvin Booth's photographs are the opposite, for they are light and indirect, sex is nowhere to be seen. Erotic photography makes reference to the connection of a person to their body - their body as a clue to who they are, their individuality signaled through what and how they desire. A photograph of a stranger always alludes to the mystery of not knowing that stranger, to wondering what it would be like to know her. A nude photograph can make this mystery more acute. The erotic can be a form of knowledge just as conversation or biography is.

### **Shadows and contrast**

Projected shadow is a local relative deficiency in the quantity of light reaching a surface. Shadow is also shading - the local relative variation in the quantity of light reflected from the surface to the eye. For Alvin Booth, shadows are his central effect and his photographs are stark examples of these two shadow phenomena. Shadow perception is of great interest to cognitive neuroscience because it likely involves both bottom-up and top-down processing. Bottom up simply implies that processing is guided from the outside world, and top down implies that processing is guided from higher cortical regions. The functional architecture of the visual cortex has helped shape the traditional view that visual input is processed serially, in a bottom-up cascade of cortical regions that analyze increasingly complex information. This view has been challenged by models proposing a simultaneous bottom-up and top-down flow of information in the cortex. Recent findings support those proposals by showing that top-down mechanisms might play an important role in shadow processing, which implies that high-level information is activated earlier than some lower-level information.

Shadows aide visual perception of objects and bodies through edge detection and luminance discontinuity - in essence information is conveyed by a dark line. Second, the variations of shadow within the body give us "shape-from-shading". We can discuss these ideas more concretely by looking, scientifically of course, at the chiaroscuro effects on the model's breasts in figure 9911330. The outline of the breasts, demarcated by the boundary between background luminance and foreground shadow, is a very salient stimulus for edge-detecting neurons. Transformation of gradations of inner shading into shape provides us with the three dimensional breast. Machine vision can do using complex mathematics to

extract slant/tilt, whereas in human vision this bottom-up process is likely aided by previous top-down knowledge of the human body.

### **Touching the photograph with your eyes**

A puzzling phenomenon alluded to by Ernst Gombrich in his monograph "Art and Illusion" is that the body covered in a veil is more erotic than when it is naked. Roland Barthes makes a similar observation in his book "Camera Lucida", when he comments on a self-portrait by Robert Mapplethorpe. He locates the erotic content in the "blind field", in what is not shown directly. The photograph is enjoining us to act upon its implied rather than shown promise. It is as if the need to act in order to uncover what is desired leads to the enhancement of desire itself. After all, when all the seagulls at the gallery see that three striped stick behind glass, etiquette demands that they just look but they all secretly desire to peck it. It is the idea of action that provides the neuroscientific clue here. Recent research supports the notion of connection between perception and a feeling of action, showing that when we perceive an object we often link a specific motor response to it. For example, when we see a red light this can prime a braking movement with our foot. Using functional brain imaging, a technology that allows us to detect and visualize brain areas active during a behavior, researchers have shown that when we perceive objects associated with actions, brain areas associated with movement are activated even when we do not in fact make a movement. Functional brain imaging has also been used to attempt to identify the neural correlates of beauty. Are there brain areas specifically engaged when subjects view art that they consider to be beautiful? The answer seems to be yes and, surprisingly, motor areas are part of this activation. Thus it could be conjectured that when we see Alvin Booth's models covered in latex, their nakedness is enhanced, and the pleasure of viewing them increased, by the activation of brain areas associated with the imagined act of pulling the latex off their bodies or of waking them up from sleep.

In addition, the latex likely evokes sensory as well as motor responses. Latex is like a second skin, like a membrane. The photographs remind us viscerally of biological membranes sticking to and enveloping the models. It is reminiscent of that unwanted tactile sensation we get watching a film of a tarantula crawling over someone else's arm. Seeing latex up against someone else's skin may invoke a feeling of tactile closeness to the model's skin. Synesthesia (Greek, *syn* = together + *aisthesis* = perception) is the involuntary physical experience of a cross-modal association. That is, the stimulation of one sensory modality reliably causes a perception in one or more different senses. In a recent study, a new form of synesthesia was described in which visual perception of touch elicits conscious tactile experiences in the perceiver. The woman in question experienced a tactile sensation on her own body when observing another person being touched on the equivalent body part. It can be conjectured that Booth through clever use of latex's texture, is able to elicit a mild version of visuo-tactile synesthesia in all of us.

Artists like Alvin Booth are undoubtedly tapping in to cognitive processes that in their sum represent the esthetic experience. This statement is sure to be considered reductionist and even frightening to those who love art. This is to misunderstand. Great art will always retain its spooky

quality. Freud referred to it as the uncanny; the residue that is left over after explanation is finished. It is the separation between the third person objective and the first person subjective. Just as explaining the structure of a joke or stimulating the human amygdala in the absence of a joke will not substitute for the artistry and joy of the joke itself, the uncanny effect of great art will never go away because of scientific explanations. The term spookiness may invoke ghosts and darkness. However, what we have here is the female form in all its bright life, a brightness accentuated by the contrast introduced by splashes of sleep and shadow.