



art ●●●

Imitation of Life

by **Vince Aletti**

March 31 - April 6, 1999



Teasing the tension between reality and artifice: Malerie Marder's *Untitled* (1998)

(Courtesy Lawrence Rubin Greenberg Van Doren Fine Art)

Alexei Hay

Bronwyn Keenan
3 Crosby Street
Through April 10

'Another Girl, Another Planet'

Lawrence Rubin
Greenberg Van Doren Fine Art
730 Fifth Avenue
Through April 20

In the decade between the publication of *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* (1986) and her retrospective at the Whitney (1996), Nan Goldin was, for better or worse, the major influence on young photographers. Seeing countless copies of her intensely personal, casually gorgeous pictures only underlined Goldin's achievement; not everyone can reinvent the color snapshot as social document. But even before the Whitney show, Goldin's powerful sway was loosening, eclipsed by the growing popularity of the sort of photographic fictions staged most persuasively by her friend and colleague Philip-Lorca diCorcia. Though Cindy Sherman's instantly iconic "film stills," Tina Barney's class-conscious social studies, and Sally Mann's choreographed family dramas are also key, the latest crop of photo M.F.A.s have clearly been studying diCorcia's spectacular imitations of life.

Nothing, of course, is real in a photograph, but, until recently at least, we allowed ourselves to be convinced of its realism. Even if the history of the medium is rife with fabulous fakes, a photo was accepted as a document— an actual record of things and events captured on film. That document could absorb a certain amount of artifice— from theatrical stylization to airbrushing— and still retain its seductive veracity. All the postmodern work calculated to expose the unreliability, duplicity, and essential falsehood of the photo has had its effect— thanks, I needed that— but it wasn't until the seemingly overnight ubiquity of computer manipulation and digital processing that virtually all photographic representation was thrown into question. Still, photographers rely on our belief even as they subvert it. And in spite of our suspicion, we're inclined to share the fantasy.

DiCorcia's particular fantasy is a subtly inflected, dramatically heightened realism; his domestic moments, street scenes, and environmental portraits discover the truly marvelous in the utterly mundane. Jeff Wall takes a similar tack, but his process is usually more labor-intensive and technically sophisticated and his results more overtly cinematic. If

diCorcia's influence is wider, it's probably because he keeps his tricks (most of which involve lighting and staging) to a minimum and his drama contained; though hard to match, he's easy to imitate. Even before he did his own spreads in *W* and *Harper's Bazaar*, diCorcia's signature look— that lambent light, that disarming mix of sensuality and ennui— was all over fashion editorial and advertising. But it's even more popular on gallery walls, where diCorcia has inspired a slew of pseudodocumentarians and canny fabulists, many of whom have adapted his methods to their own special madness.

Prime case in point: Alexei Hay, a 25-year-old just four years out of Brown who's already made a big impression with his magazine work. Two of the eight huge pictures in his first solo show appeared in a *New York Times Magazine* essay on teenagers in their bedrooms, but in this context, a girl lacing up her Adidas on a patchwork gingham quilt and a young cowboy standing self-consciously amid his rodeo mementos take on a rich theatricality. Though both these pictures were obviously posed, they draw upon a long history of stylized naturalism in portraiture and, however false, are intended as documents. The other photos here veer off into a more frankly filmic realm.

All of Hay's pieces (especially the two supersized collaborations with photographer Justine Parsons) have the feel of contemporary fashion photos, even if there are almost no clothes in evidence. They imagine a world, a moment of damaged, downmarket glamour and boredom that might seem snapshot-casual were it not so exquisitely lit. An overly made-up young woman sprawls back across a table in a funky Chinese restaurant wearing only panty hose and something that she's hiked up to reveal one breast; a shirtless teenager looks out the window of a dingy hotel room holding a crying baby to his shoulder; a girl in jeans stands in the corner of a used-car showroom staring vacantly at the empty parking lot like a strip-mall version of Edward Hopper. Even the guy getting a blowjob in his cherry red car looks lost in solitude; gazing straight ahead, one hand absentmindedly placed on his girl's ass, he hasn't bothered to take his headphones off. Hay's fictions are pungent, corrosive, cool, and, above all, ambiguous. Stripped of narrative but full of possibility, they're stills from a movie we can only imagine— not slices of life, but screenplays compressed to a single, dazzling frame.

The same could be said for many of the photographs gathered in "Another Girl, Another Planet," the rare group show that lives up to its preopening buzz. Organized by the gallery's Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn and photographer Gregory Crewdson, whose diorama-like images of suburban strangeness have also been widely influential, "Another Girl" rounds up 13 artists, most of them new, all but one female, and five of whom got their M.F.A.s at Yale, where Crewdson teaches. Teasing the tension between reality and artifice, document and fabrication, nearly all of these photographers have staged their work, many with the flair and assurance of veteran directors. If the resulting images share a certain stylistic crispness and professional finish, they couldn't be more varied or more instructive. Anyone who spends time looking at fashion magazines knows a thing or two about the construction of reality, but the best of these photographers have found a way to record the world both as it is and as they imagine it.

Take Justine Kurland, whose large-scale photos of young girls in the woods have a sweet, playful grandeur and a painter's feel for the buttery warmth of sunlight. Kurland imagines a group of pretty runaways gathered in an Edenic forest, bathing, primping, communing with nature and one another: adolescent Alices lost in a Hudson Valley wonderland. Kurland's vision of the band of outsiders as carefree citizens of a new

world of girls pervades the show, where young women rule, if not always with such unrestrained joy. British phenom Sarah Jones finds one emerging from under her bed in a room with flowered drapes and grass green carpeting□ her own private garden. Malerie Marder discovers another in a bikini, stretched out voluptuously on an inflated raft, drifting in a pool at night like some momentarily silenced siren. Jenny Gage, who went looking for female drifters in California, places one in a melting light at the side of a road; another, her back to us, looks out the open doorway of a room whose drapes block the sun. And Katy Grannan, who advertised for girls between the ages of 18 and 22 in a Poughkeepsie newspaper, photographs her subjects in their favorite rooms, often in their underwear, sometimes nude, always disconcertingly radiant and ripe.

As constructs of femininity, these are deliberately anti-iconic (even if Gage slyly echoes Sherman's stills persona), coolly nuanced, and so smart. The other pieces here□ by Dana Hoey, Vibeke Tandberg, Jita Hanzlova, Gabriel Brandt, Sarah Dobai, and Dyanita Singh□ hover similarly between fact and fiction, their female subjects playing themselves in dramas of anxiety, alienation, defiance, camaraderie, self-sufficiency, love, and loss. Invited to believe, encouraged to doubt, we hesitate before the work's studied ambiguity, then plunge in. Resistance is not only futile, it's foolish.