

PA Meeting with Cara Judea Alhadeff

Interview by Filip Naudts, in FOTO + (Utrecht, Netherlands), pp. 6-11, May 2005

(translated from Flemish)

The work of the American photographer, Cara Judea Alhadeff, has been mentioned in the same breathe as Cindy Sherman's, Joel-Peter Witkin's, Sally Mann's and John Coplans's. Recently, her color photographs were in exhibit in SFMoMA. After her exhibition in the Belgian gallery, van Campen & Rochtus in Antwerp, *Foto +* had an intimate meeting with this artist, who derives her inspiration from sexuality.

March 30th

It's easy to spot the red hair of my interviewee as she exits the airplane with the gray American business people, who are speeding to the closest taxi cab they can get. She is not in a hurry; she has arranged her own private driver: me. "Are you Flip?" Underneath her red hair, I see her face, a broad smile that will accompany me that day. A kiss and a hug before I realize that I am 'Flip'. Blind dates have the advantage that both parties are able to get along as well as possible. We exchange favors, jokes and compliments. "I am so happy to meet you," we say at the same time. "And great that you want to ask me questions about my work, and is it possible when we are in your place to take a picture of you?" For a moment I think that this sexually-inspired artist has developed a very quick seduction scheme, but I correct myself and say, "Of course, I would like that."

Psychosexual Manipulation

On the way to the interview and the shoot, I ask her how she became connected with photography. "I was very young and lived for a while on a farm in the South of France, and at my father's suggestion, a commune in Northern Belgium. By staying abroad, my intense experiences were like self-therapy. I was the youngest in the commune, and the only one of North American descent. There was an atmosphere of psychosexual manipulation. To not lose myself, I had a constant need to write about what was going on around me. Still, I had severe nightmares. It became unbearable and I went back to the United States to study. In the US, I was in culture shock. Writing didn't give me enough peace of mind or safety, so I started to photograph. I took a girlfriend to the forest to photograph her. When I photographed her, I got strange skin allergies, which I experienced up close and personal together with my friend in unnatural positions. My mentor at the time was the renowned photographer, Joel Sternfeld."

Question: Are you inspired by him?

"Yes, and I am influenced by the masters of painting: Peter Bruegel, Bosch, Picasso, and my own mother and my father, as well as art from the Congo.

Although I am an Iyengar Yoga instructor to make a living, I truly feel I am a full-time artist. I am constantly making photographic prints, organizing new exhibits, and maintaining public relations with collectors, galleries, museums, artists, and also with international journalists, hé Filip."

A firm slap on the buttocks followed by a solid scream.

"It was only after I moved to San Francisco that I was able to focus on my career as a photographer. I had come to the understanding that, for example, the gay community is more liberated, accepted and infiltrated in the world of artists. There (in San Francisco), sexual upbringing (and/or education) has been accepted as an art form through performing arts and visual arts. Another main aspect in my

professional life as an artist is my collaboration with other artists. I often collaborate with a choreographer, and an improvisational poet, and sculptors.”

The perception as part of reality

What is the connection between her work as a photographer and her private life? How does she develop her work and how is it involved with her vision

“If you know that my favorite pose is the headstand, then that should explain quite a few things. My perception of the world upside down has a more cohesive logic to me than it does rightside up. I don’t like it when the art critics describe my work as abstract, because I strive to reveal the absurdities, chaos and contradictions from daily life. I do that, for example, by creating a new atmosphere in a recognizable atmosphere: put body parts out of context, and then put them in a strange context. For example, naked pregnant women together, often more than fifteen, located where you would not expect them.

When I started with photography, I mainly was searching for people with a physical attitude that had something special. I’ve gotten to know my best friends that way. Some of them have been modeling for over fifteen years. I also take pictures of my family and myself.”

Question: Do these composed images reflect the complexity of your inner self?

“I am interested in creating an awareness of seeing in the observer, to wake him/her up, as if I were to put the viewer to work. By incorporating various parts of the body, space, and objects in one composition, sometimes accompanied by unexpected organic or synthetic materials, I am asking the viewer to pause and think. The result is that the comfort zone of the viewer is being questioned, causing friction in the psyche of the viewer. It is strange, but in the United States, many people feel fear and discomfort with the phenomenon of ambiguity, simply because they can’t judge the consequences. When they can’t give something its place immediately, they are overwhelmed by fear of losing what is recognizable. And because of that, my work has been censored several times. My experiences in the commune, scientific research concerning deviant sexual behavior, the history of pornography and censorship, as well as the cultural analysis of how Jews, gays, prostitutes and other groups marked as pathologically disturbed and needing to be “fixed” influence my motivations for taking photographs. Becoming aware of this part of history explains the main aspects in my work in which I question how the “abnormal”, the unknown, is being held separate by society by looking at it as if it is pathological. Because of my run-ins with censorship, I learned a lot about the narrowing effect of interpretation and perception. Reality becomes a superficial obstacle as soon as people disconnect their spirit and choose only to see what they want to see. Through my work, I hope that the viewer will see reality beyond immediate, reaction-based perception.”

Question: Very interesting, all this stuff, but how are we going to work?

“I’ve got two ideas,” she says, “I take a picture of you at the high stairwell along with your son, and this huge photograph of yours. After that, you can go sit in the loft.” She probably enjoys forcing me in all kinds of clumsy positions. “And, of course, you would like to see me undressed,” I think, to beat her to the punch. “But not in this case.”

A little shocked, I immediately adhere to her wishes. On top of the loft, I see how she has her camera from a bird’s eye view, a 1968 Hasselblad which replaced her Rollei SL66. She uses Fuji 120 ISO100. She doesn’t use digital cameras and she doesn’t see that happening anytime soon. “It is important to me that the public understands that my photographs are not being manipulated in a darkroom or in a computer. My photographic technique is confrontational because it has to bear witness on how our

world is put together. Furthermore, I present my work in different ways. Sometimes, the classic way, hung on the wall, light-boxes, sometimes three dimensional constructions, and also performances. The exhibition in Antwerp (this is the third two-person exhibition with my mother) is very important to me and my personal life history, it has come full circle.

The drive to express myself creatively started in 1989 in Northern Belgium. The seeds that I sowed then finally sprouted and blossomed in the US, and are re-growing now in Northern Belgium.”

I have to interrupt her now, my cell phone is ringing. It is the gallery who notifies us that the press, including television, is expecting her. “No problem,” she says, “I have taken the shots.” Too bad there isn’t enough time to finish the rest of the photographs so we can use them for this article.