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ARTNEWS



"I CAN ENTERTAIN THE IDEA THAT MY MORAL COMPASS IS A LITTLE OFF":  
A TALK WITH PIOTR UKLAŃSKI

BY BILL POWERS



BILL POWERS: EASTMAN KODAK'S *THE JOY OF PHOTOGRAPHY* WAS PUBLISHED IN 1979, ALMOST TWENTY YEARS BEFORE YOU LOOKED TO IT FOR INSPIRATION. BY CONTRAST, RICHARD PRINCE BEGAN MAKING HIS INSTAGRAM PORTRAITS WHEN THAT PLATFORM WAS RELATIVELY NEW. MY QUESTION IS: HAVE GESTATION PERIODS SPED UP WITH THE RAPIDITY OF TECHNOLOGY?

Piotr Ukleński: I don't think you need to wait. The fact is that in 1979 I was 11 years old and didn't know shit about photography. I had to learn. What I liked about the Kodak book is that it tells you how to make the photograph. I didn't take any pictures from the book itself. I put myself in a submissive position. I was like a dumb Polack following instructions rather than some savvy conceptual artist with the wisdom to pick things worth following.

BP: SPEAKING OF REFERENCES, WAS THE PHOTOGRAPH OF YOUR WIFE'S ASS—OR MORE SPECIFICALLY YOUR DECISION TO PREMIERE THAT IMAGE AS AN ADVERTISEMENT IN *ARTFORUM* IN 2003—A DIRECT RESPONSE TO LYNDA BENGLIS'S CONTROVERSIAL AD FROM 1974?

PU: I can't deny the connection, but I was more concerned with giving a voice to my subject—in this case, Alison Gingeras. The viewer needs to make an assessment regarding who takes the power in this situation—the artist or the sitter—so I had to find a venue to support that context.

BP: "THE NAZIS," YOUR SERIES OF FAMOUS ACTORS PORTRAYING GERMAN SOLDIERS IN MOVIES AND TV SHOWS, INCLUDES A HEADSHOT OF STEVE MCQUEEN FROM HIS ROLE IN *THE GREAT ESCAPE*. MY OBJECTION HERE IS THAT HIS CHARACTER ISN'T ACTUALLY A NAZI IN THE MOVIE.

PU: If Steve McQueen is putting on the uniform to fool someone into believing he's a Nazi and, within the movie's narrative, he is successful at it—how can I separate his portrayal from any other included in "The Nazis"?

BP: IN ONE OF YOUR EXHIBITION CATALOGUES, I READ AN INTERVIEW WITH YOU AND ROMAN POLANSKI. WHAT WAS IT LIKE TO MEET HIM?

OPPOSITE Piotr Ukleński photographed on March 18 at the opening of his show "Fatal Attraction: Piotr Ukleński Photographs" at the Met.

PU: I was very close to having him act in my next movie after *Summer Love*. The funding was secure—we were greenlit—and then he got arrested in Switzerland. I so loved him in the film *A Pure Formality*, where he played a detective. That was really my point of reference in casting Roman.

BP: I SEE A KINSHIP IN YOUR TORN PAPER PIECES AND THE CUTOUT SILHOUETTES OF KARA WALKER IN THAT YOU ARE BOTH RESCUING A SORT OF SECOND-CLASS ART-MAKING PRACTICE AND ELEVATING IT TO HIGH ART.

PU: Certainly most of my techniques—including the photography or the fiber art or the torn paper—are a form of applied arts. I'm promiscuous in the materials I use in order to get what I need.

BP: LIKE THE GIANT EYEBALL SCULPTURE YOU HAVE ON VIEW AT THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART?

PU: Did you see *Big Hero 6*? Do you remember the friendly robot, Baymax? That's kind of how I feel about the eyeball.

BP: PHILIP-LORCA DICORCIA ONCE SAID THAT ANYONE WHO LOOKS AT A PHOTOGRAPH AND BELIEVES THAT WHAT THEY'RE SEEING HASN'T BEEN ALTERED IN SOME WAY IS COMPLETELY NAIVE. DO YOU AGREE?

PU: Yes, but I want to make a point about manipulating or retouching. While I was working on my show of photographs curated from the Met's permanent collection, I saw Robert Capa's *Falling Soldier*, which was retouched by him personally. And he did such a bad job. I loved it. And Man Ray did some terrible retouching. They didn't give a fuck because their images were so strong. I admire that. I went back and looked at my own retouched photographs, which I was so proud of at the time, and they seem so clean and cold to me.

BP: I RECALL SEEING A POST ON TWITTER BY ROBERTA SMITH WHO COMMENTED THAT THERE WAS PERHAPS A BIT TOO MUCH NUDITY IN YOUR CURATED WALL OF PHOTOGRAPHY.

PU: I can entertain the idea that my moral compass is a little off. But how can I curate a room around the themes of Eros and Thanatos and not have any nudity?

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*A survey of Piotr Ukleński's work runs through August 16 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. A concurrent show he curated from the Met's collection closes June 14.*