

ANNE COLLIER: WOMAN WITH A CAMERA

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There is an adage that beginning creative writers should “write what they know.” In the visual arts, this ice breaker for initiating an artistic process is less common, perhaps because of the staunch and undying modernist traditions of self-criticism, medium-specificity, and cold-eyed objectivity. Under the sway of modernism, delving into the minutiae of the self, of one’s family, or of one’s upbringing could easily turn maudlin and therefore become a crime against the cause. Anne Collier, however, has for more than ten years defied such prejudice by basing much of her artistic inquiry on subjects that are close to home—what she knows—and at the same time maintaining allegiance to the core characteristics of a self-respecting modernist. Her photographs of the past decade are cool and detached, rigorously circumscribed in format or presentation, and almost always neutrally record objects that already exist in the world. Likewise, Collier’s photographs tend to address subjects germane to the world of photography while simultaneously questioning clichés and tropes within that sphere. Undergirding much of her work, however, are personal struggles that surely find cathartic outlets in her photographs, eliciting empathy from the viewer and asking the audience also to invest in these same images. It’s quite a feat to create work that is both personal and universal, deeply humane and sanguinely reserved—but that is what Collier has consistently achieved.

The events that have largely defined the life of Anne Collier the person, and that have provided subject matter for Anne Collier the artist, are the death of her mother from breast cancer when she was five and the passing of her father twenty years later. For an only child, being orphaned at such a relatively young age was a considerable trauma that influenced much of her early work.¹ This history is clearly invoked in pictures such as *Jim and Lynda* (2002) (fig. 2), a paired set of images of a Pacific Ocean horizon near Catalina Island off the coast of Los Angeles where both of her parents’ ashes were scattered. Knowing this story, the still and uneventful compositions hang heavy with loss and waywardness, but already Collier makes the viewer aware of photographic and filmic conventions in order to symbolize death and moments of tragic contemplation. Such expansive and beautiful seascapes from films and advertising populate our collective memory as shorthand for repose, reflection, and awe. Throughout the course of her career, Collier has led us to this precipice of mourning and psychological fragility, making us think of our own personal stories. Yet the artist only takes us so far, deftly pulling back (or holding on) at just the right moment, suggesting perhaps that she is stronger than we think (and stronger than we are). An example of this narrative control can be found in *8 x 10 (Jim)* and *8 x 10 (Lynda)* (both 2007; pp. 48–49), in which those same marine compositions are revisited as mere photographic objects sitting in film boxes. The sad story still resonates, but at a remove, as if the artist is saying that these are just two of many talismanic images filed away in these boxes, and she can pull them out or put them away of her own free will.

Knowing of these painful circumstances in Collier’s life, the viewer can infer that the many photographs dealing with psychology, especially of the popular, self-help variety, are evidence of a struggle to come to terms with loss. One of the earliest comes from the same year as the initial versions of *Jim and Lynda*, which helped make the exhibition at Marc Foxx Gallery where they were first shown a particularly poignant and hand-wringing affair. *Introduction, Fear, Anger, Despair, Guilt, Hope, Joy, Love/Conclusion* (2002/14; pp. 86–87), shot like most of Collier’s images as a straightforward product photograph against a

seamless backdrop, devoid of inflection or fancy lighting, depicts a vacuum-formed plastic clamshell box of eight cassette tapes. Each tape bears a label with one of the words in the title, presumably narrated by a psychologist instructing listeners to conquer (or in the case of *Hope, Joy, and Love*, to embrace) that particular feeling. Collier's deadpan depiction of this artifact makes it seem laughable that these complicated emotions can be so easily summed up in single tapes, while other quirks like the ambiguous *Introduction* or the truncation of experiencing *Love* to its full explication by having to share a tape with some sort of ominous *Conclusion* make such a product all the more questionable. Again, however, we quickly turn from intuiting Collier's own *Problems* (the name of another photograph of a tape of the same title from 2005; fig. 1) as inferred by the image to confronting our own relationship to these states of being. After all, each of us navigates these emotions in varying degrees of importance and relevance on a daily basis.

Collier has often structured the growth of her practice by returning to certain themes or ideas again and again, making important revisions each time that indicate a new insight into the topic. For instance, in *Despair* (2005; fig. 11) one of these aforementioned self-help tapes of the same title is shown with its magnetic tape pulled from the reels, jumbled in a maddening tangle. Collier brilliantly provides a formal and conceptual cause-and-effect that illustrates perhaps both the result of a derailed therapy session as well as the difficulty of putting it (the tape, one's life) back in order. In another photograph from the following year, the artist eliminated the cassette entirely from the composition in a series that shows gleaming brown tape loops against a white backdrop. These images revel in beautiful abstract arabesques devoid of menace unless one knows their titles: *Spiritual Warfare* and *The Unique and Mysterious Role of Hope* (both 2006; pp. 88 and 89), for example. Collier has found other types of self-help source material in order to fuel further photographic series, such as the 2007 photograph *My Goals for One Year* (pp. 46–47), which invites the user of this stapled paper manual to analyze their goals for their career, salary, personal relationships, family relationships, health and weight, transportation, and spirituality, among other categories. Such an analytical approach to the conducting of everyday life is both commonplace and ridiculous, a cocktail of careerism and psychotherapy with dashes of self-hatred and social ambition that is regularly directed toward young women in pop-culture outlets such as *Cosmopolitan* magazine. Because of her restrained framing of such subject matter, Collier's work never outwardly condemns; rather, in works such as these she puts the onus on viewers to come to their own conclusions. We can imagine both artist and viewer finding some usefulness in even the most banal postulations.

Indeed, in a number of photographs, Collier shows us that such self-analysis and critique are often only one step away from ruminations on the big questions of the meaning of life, the unknowable, and the sublime. A group of five photographs called *Questions* from 2011 (pp. 90–95), for instance, depict varying views of a manila file folder, each showing a different tattered sheet of colored paper that looks like a cue card for some sort of group discussion. What the topic might be remains a mystery, as these sheets could be tools for a screenwriting workshop, a survivor's group, Bible study, or even an investigative journalism course. The actual origin of the file is unknown, as the artist found them on the street in the East Village at least a year before she could justify using them artistically.² Detached from their intended context and seen within Collier's openly discursive practice, these questions take on a universal, even existential significance. For instance, the page on *Relevance* reads: "Why is this important? What does it all mean? Who cares about this idea?"; the folio devoted to *Evidence* asks: "How do we know what we know? What is the source and how reliable is it?" Many of the questions are ones we should ask as engaged

consumers of visual culture, as the *Connection* page suggests: "How are things, events or people connected to each other? Where have I seen this before?" In her sly way, and with these artifacts from contemporary culture as her prompts, Collier provokes us to think critically but not without an ever-present poignancy that connects her inquiries to her own life. Thus we also detect a sense of introspection embodied in the *Supposition* sheet: "What if . . . ? Could things be otherwise? What if there are or were alternatives?" In this work, Collier ably joins a long tradition of text-based, conceptual art made by Rene Magritte, Ed Ruscha, Barbara Kruger, and Jenny Holzer (among many others), as she relies on her razor-sharp eye and featherweight touch to coax grand social and philosophical treasure out of what was clearly someone else's trash.

Collier is an obsessive researcher, constantly scouring eBay, thrift stores, and used book and record shops in search of evocative materials for use in her photographs. In 2007, for instance, she made a photograph of a 1970s-era poster of a nude woman at the beach, walking out into the surf (fig. 3). The calligraphic "California" logo at the bottom right corner helps classify this image into the category of deflected self-portraits found throughout the artist's repertoire: a California girl who has a particular attachment to the ocean. But Collier has also become a connoisseur of such outré images, often tracking down the original photographer or finding rare versions of similar material. She returned to this imagery in 2013 when she found a negative from the same photo shoot on eBay, which yielded the original poster, and then made a large scale print of it. *Negative (California)* (2013; pp. 100–01) moves away from the dated, slightly ironic nostalgia of the original image and brings new gravitas to the picture, easily allowing us to imagine that this figure, by now clearly a stand-in for the artist, is boldly stepping out into the dark unknown. It is not outlandish to think of this as Collier's take on of Yves Klein's famous *Leap into the Void* (1960; fig. 4), another self-portrait addressing the bravery, faith, and risks of all meaningful artistic action. It joins other similar images from art history, whether from the recent past like Giovanni Anselmo's *Entrare nell'opera* (1971), Felix Gonzalez-Torres's "*Untitled*" (1995; fig. 5)—both similarly photographically based—or the oft-cited poster boy for the sublime, Caspar David Friedrich, and his painting *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* (c. 1817; fig. 6). The great unknown is not foreign territory for Collier, and is consistent with the philosophical turn that her art has taken in recent years. In addition to the aforementioned beckoning seascapes that communicate her own version of the sublime, she has also turned her lens on cloudy skies (both ominously dark and peacefully blue) and she has made numerous images with far-off galaxies or even what could be read as the total darkness of outer space. Two works from 2011 coax such grand themes through typically modest conventions, by featuring cropped arms that enter the frame from the lower edge, holding open books for the viewer to scrutinize. Collier often uses this simple technique to activate her found material by calling attention to the materiality of the objects she is photographing, but also to situate the viewer in the position of the beholder of the book, so that the viewer could easily imagine these arms belonging to the artist herself as she discovers these epiphanous moments. In *Open Book #7 (Light Years)* (pp. 96–97), for instance, two hands open a book to a spread of an alternatively foggy and sparkly galaxy that seems to beckon passage through this metaphoric looking glass and into another realm. Its counterpart, *Open Book #6 (George Platt Lynes)* (pp. 98–99), offers a much more uncertain proposal, a double dose of blackness that embodies a range of emotions, from a premonition of death, as if a card reader has flipped these pages open to reveal an ominous, impending ending, or perhaps less dramatically, an ascetic rumination on the monochrome, as if a readymade *Black Square* by Malevich (fig. 7) or Ad Reinhardt painting had unexpectedly appeared in an unlikely, down-market location. Indeed, the fact that this expanse of mute blackness

was found in a book devoted to the romantic figurative photographer referenced in the title, or that the awe-inspiring image of a galaxy graces the end papers of a book by Douglas Kirkland titled *Light Years: Three Decades Photographing Among the Stars* (Thames and Hudson, 1989), which is primarily dedicated to Hollywood luminaries, reveals Collier's canny ability to find surprising ironies in the humblest of sources. That both photographs rely on photographic sources that are used for wholly unexpected purposes is another one of the artist's hallmarks—interrogating her own industry to find hidden truths.

The artist has used *Light Years* before. For instance, in *Untitled (Light Years, Douglas Kirkland)* (2009; pp. 62–63), she focused on a spread with a heart-wrenching photograph of Judy Garland crying in half light, capturing a fragile emotional state that is consistent with other themes in Collier's work. In this picture, Collier draws the viewer into the drama, allowing sympathy for the famously troubled movie star, who may also in this case be an emotional stand-in for the artist, letting Judy cry for Anne. Collier won't let us forget, however, that Garland is also an actress and that this is merely one photograph in a whole book of gifted and beguiling actors who are trained to elicit such responses. Again we see the artist's subtle way of maintaining important critical distance, as we did in the box of photos that contain the *Jim* and *Lynda* seascapes, or here, with the multiple "flags" marking the pages, letting us know that this is one of many images that has attracted the artist's attention. Collier's portrait of Judy Garland is part of a larger project in which the artist has focused on photography's role in cementing the look and aura of famous women, and then used the medium's inherent reproducibility to disseminate their visages throughout popular culture. Over the years, she has studiously selected a variety of photographic media to make this point, relying on pop-culture photo books such as *Light Years* to highlight our appetite for such imagery, but also on posters, promotional film stills, magazines, record covers, and other media to suggest the scope of this reality.

Folded Madonna Poster (Steven Meisel) (2007; pp. 70–71) is a potent example of this aspect of Collier's work. The original image is a beautiful black-and-white portrait of the pop star smoking in bed (smoking is another lively sub-theme in Collier's work), her blonde locks tousled across white bedsheets. Collier does not disguise the source material, crediting the well-known fashion photographer Steven Meisel in the title, but this is no pristine art print, rather it is a large-scale reproduction, creased through the folding upon itself several times as if to more easily fit inside a book or magazine, and attached to a plain white surface with two push pins. Collier emphasizes that this is an Ur-image of twenty-first-century popular culture and photography's central role within it: a post-coital (what else is smoking naked in bed supposed to suggest?) blonde goddess (substitute Marilyn Monroe or any other iconic starlet) captured by a brand-name lensman and packaged for mass consumption. Or perhaps this is still a late twentieth-century manifestation, as paperless digital imagery now circulates even more widely without a physical object ever needing to be made. In either case, a camera is crucial and the same themes and subjects are recycled over and over again. Collier has continued to develop this line of inquiry in several other works, such as the *Double Marilyn* of 2007 (pp. 72–73) with its Warholian overtones, or *May 1979 (Old Photographs, Patrick Lichfield)* (2011; pp. 84–85), one of a number of images of "tasteful" erotic calendars. One of the most complex in this genre is her *May/June 2009 (Cindy Sherman, Mark Seliger)* (2009; pp. 60–61) in which again we see a Warhol-inspired doubling that calls attention now as it did in the 1960s to the reproducibility and banality of media imagery. But here we are faced with the cover of the men's fashion magazine *L'Uomo Vogue* that features a smoking (again), blonde (again) Cindy Sherman, dressed in male garb. Sherman is the ultimate artistic avatar of self-reinvention and getting under the Botoxed skin of contemporary image culture, and a natural heroine within Collier's world.

The similarity between fashion photographer Mark Seliger's image and the double self-portraits that Sherman and peer Richard Prince made in 1980, *Untitled (Richard Prince and Cindy Sherman)* (fig. 8), comprises another compelling argument for the hierarchical collapse of photographic imagery that Collier makes throughout her oeuvre. Collier's graduate-school teacher James Welling was a pioneer of this once-heretical way of thinking about photography, sometimes cutting photographic advertisements from magazines and representing them as his own work without any other intervention (*Untitled [Greenland]*, 1975; fig. 9) or carefully crafting prints in the darkroom or on the computer. Ultimately, Welling refused to make value judgments about these different means to ultimately photographic ends. This is where Collier reveals herself as a conceptualist, questioning and problematizing fine-art photography's core beliefs.

Collier pairs her investigation of the trope of the passive female subject/object with a growing body of work she calls *Woman With A Camera*, in which women are depicted taking control of image creation. These include *Woman With A Camera (The Last Sitting, Bert Stern)* (2009; pp. 64–65), which draws on the much-studied book documenting Marilyn Monroe's final photo shoot and captures Marilyn turning a Nikon back at her portraitist; *Woman With A Camera (diptych)* (2006; pp. 44–45) in which Collier photographs two publicity stills of a camera-toting Faye Dunaway in the 1970s thriller *Eyes of Laura Mars*; or more recently *Woman With A Camera (Postcard, Verso Recto)* (2013; pp. 54–55) in which a bare-breasted African tribeswoman playfully points her lens at another unseen camera. These works can, of course, be seen as images of female empowerment and agency or perhaps some kind of reversal of the male gaze, but Collier's deeper skepticism simmers beneath their surfaces. Perhaps it is more plausible to interpret them as further examples of male fantasy rising up rhizomatically through popular culture. Collier has found the photo industry itself to be rampantly and (probably) unwittingly sexist, and her photographs skewering its conventions surround the *Woman With A Camera* series with a halo of critique. In images like *Zoom 1978* (2009; pp. 58–59), a camera obscures a reclining female nude's head on the cover of a French photo magazine, and in both *Woman With Cameras #1* and *#2* (both 2012; pp. 56–57) we see spreads in another photo magazine with a female nude draped languidly behind new camera equipment. In these and others of their type, Collier has mined a rich vein of irony in which women's bodies and phallic cameras become intertwined in a misogynist system that is as consistent as it is extensive. Such photographs and the feminist insights that give them their punch, make her great *Man With A Camera (Telephoto)* (2011; pp. 78–79) all the more hilarious when it is considered in relation to her other work. As is her method, Collier merely rephotographs something already extant in the world with no cropping, but here it is the man's head that is lopped off in her magazine source material, the better that our gaze is not returned as we admire the long black camera and lens he fondles in his lap as a symbol of his masculine virility. With a large body of work examining the objectification of women within the photo industry under her belt, Collier has recently found material such as this that reveals just as absurdly the consecration of male roles and clichés in our culture's photographic output.

And yet, this self-identified woman with a camera has overwhelmingly involved herself throughout the course of her career thus far in investigating the popular portrayal of female archetypes and photography's role in perpetuating a certain type of icon. Through Collier's viewfinder, we see American society's unending capacity for fantasizing the female, and the more sultry, teasing, or—better yet—prone she is, the more we love her. In all of these variations, the consumers of the photographs (arguably both male and female) are revealed as voracious voyeurs, addicted to the act of looking, while the image industry is ever-ready to serve up more to feast our eyes upon. We are reminded that we look to see, to know,

to buy, to dream, and to challenge, and Collier is not afraid of implicating herself in this self-perpetuating, ocular system. To address this predicament, she has also built a growing collection of eye imagery that she deploys in order to stare back at the viewer, using eyes that are both her own and appropriated from the media that she so carefully parses. These portrayals can be at once incredibly earnest, as in *Developing Tray #2 (Grey)* (2009; pp. 40–41) in which a print of her own eye is framed in a shallow plastic tub as if she herself, or at least her ability to see, depends on the alchemical rituals of photography. At other times, her vulnerability and doubt become apparent, as in *Cut (Color)* (2009; pp. 50–51) in which another print of her own eye is slashed by a cutting tool, redolent of the famous scene from Buñuel and Dalí's *Un Chien Andalou* (1929; fig. 10), and portending the devastation of losing one's sight. In works such as these, we see how Collier has assembled a wide-ranging and enthralling body of work that examines the dominance of vision within our culture—its pleasures, its pitfalls, and its mechanisms for distribution and sustainability. Her work is both a confirmation of the sophisticated state of visual literacy today and a call to remain ever vigilant of the images that might pass too easily in front of our eyes. To quote from the salvaged cue card in her photograph *Questions (Viewpoint)* (2011), we must pay attention to “From whose viewpoint or perspective are we seeing, reading, or hearing?” and in all the media we are presented, we should ask: “Are there other ways to interpret this information?” In a sustained, focused, and deeply intelligent way across more than a decade of savvy image-making, Collier challenges us to examine the world around us as carefully she does.