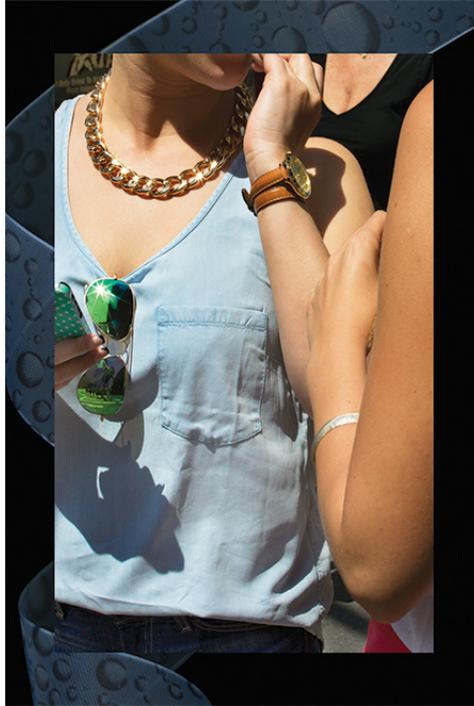


frieze

Michele Abeles

SADIE COLES HQ, LONDON, UK

Issue 167



Michele Abeles, *Watches #85*, 2014, archival pigment print, 110 × 74 cm

In the airy street-level space of Sadie Coles HQ in Mayfair, a few steps south of Mount Street, London's HQ of luxury fashion, adornments dangled conspicuously from closely cropped fragments of women's tanned, toned bodies. Watches glistened, diamonds sparkled and shampoo-commercial-quality manes shone. Manicured fingers dripping with glossy candy colours gripped shopping bags and iPhones, rays of sun glinting dramatically off every surface. The proximity of the gallery to the purveyors and patrons of haute couture is unlikely to have eluded the American artist Michele Abeles, whose photographs chronicle the urban catwalk of upmarket shoppers.

Abeles – probably best known for her Pop-ish collaged still lives featuring the male nude, which were included in MoMA's 2012 'New Photography' exhibition – here pitches slick production values against the tense energy of a moving metropolis. One of three new series of work on view in her first solo show with Sadie Coles, 'Watches' (2014) alludes, variously, to the expensive timepieces pictured, to the kind of astute, even obsessive, looking that went into their making and to an internal alertness to being observed that casts a darker note over otherwise bright pictures. Though they share something of the aesthetic of the earlier collage constructions – flattened layers, geometric forms of vivid patterns and colours, frenetic energy – they also have a sense of arrested time. If these images were moving, they'd be moving in the seductive slow motion of advertising, the kind that allows a fantasy of perfection to float through the outstretched moment. In these anonymous, mostly headless shots, clothes and accessories are our only clues to the identities and realities of the women they decorate. Like uniforms, or perhaps armour, these are all they have to distinguish themselves for, or deflect from, the constant audiences of the street.

Each photograph is subtly compounded by the backdrop that frames it – a generic computer-generated motif of watery grey dots in a nondescript swirl, incongruously cheap and banal. This type of impervious digitally rendered imagery moves from background to foreground in a second series of works in the downstairs gallery, where human presence, light and colour are overridden by technological order. Here, large scale and slightly out of focus black and white grids stand in for the motifs of figure or object, like giant, useless versions of the QR codes we're increasingly implored to zap with our smartphones. To make these (all titled *B&W*, 2014), Abeles collaborated with her brother, a military engineer, to process a photograph through an algorithm and then find visual form for the mathematical operations. In some, colour transparencies cling precariously to the edges, messy reminders of their origins. But the mystification of the original source material and the complicated technique makes them as frustrating as they are compelling.

Another play on forms of visual information is taken up in *Jungle* (2014), a series of images hung as an installation in the gallery's project space around the corner. Here, photographs of dense foliage, all cropped from a single found stock image, are overlaid with strategically positioned lines of industrial white bathroom tiles, like fragments of code or redactions. The tiles directly reference Marcel Broodthaers's homage to Stéphane Mallarmé, *Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard* (*a throw of the dice will never abolish chance*) (1969), in which lines of the eponymous 1897 poem were blocked out with black bars. These are the heaviest and most obtuse of the works on view, though perhaps purposefully so. The scenes of lush green seem to offer an escape beyond reach, half bricked-over by layers of signification – art-historical, economic, technological – that we can't quite grasp.

The title of the exhibition, 'Find Out What Happens When People Start Getting Real', is a reference to a less erudite cultural creation: the long-running MTV reality show, 'The Real World'. And the construction of reality through the codes of images is the binding theme of the show. Abeles's well-known stunt – sending a famous actress-model in her stead to an arts awards ceremony – still confuses the link between the artist's own image and identity; an online search yields photographs of her stand-in, years after the event. Abeles's work similarly scrutinizes the ways in which photographic conventions conform to, or confound, the sense of the real we perpetually contrive. The act of deciphering who we are and what we know through the complicated codes of visual cues – through images we make, consume or project – is increasingly difficult. As Abeles playfully reminds us: images are slippery things.

Sara Knelman