

Michele Abeles *Find Out What Happens When People Start Getting Real*

Sadie Coles HQ, London 4 September – 25 October

Michele Abeles's first show at Sadie Coles HQ draws mainly from three series of photographs, *Jungle*, *B&W* and *Watches* (all 2014). The last of these, presented in the South Audley Street gallery, comprises nine pictures of women wearing expensive-looking watches, snapped in the street as they pass by, their faces and feet cropped out. Each image is digitally superimposed against a black background, with simulated lace ribbon bearing droplet motifs running behind. Though presented as the main subject, the watches throw the viewer's eye towards other details: the string handles of designer shopping bags (*Watches #1320*), a hand clutching an iPhone and a packet of Marlboros (*Watches #37*). Initially, these signifiers of capitalist recreation recall the slick grotesqueries of Jessica Craig-Martin, but where she emphasises social context, Abeles withholds it, and your attention drifts away from the cosmopolitan trappings of her subjects, dwelling instead on their corporeality: moles, midribs, a tensed vein on a forearm, frayed shorts bunched up over a crotch.

Downstairs are five large photographs from the *B&W* series. For these, Abeles converted some of her existing images (we are not told which)

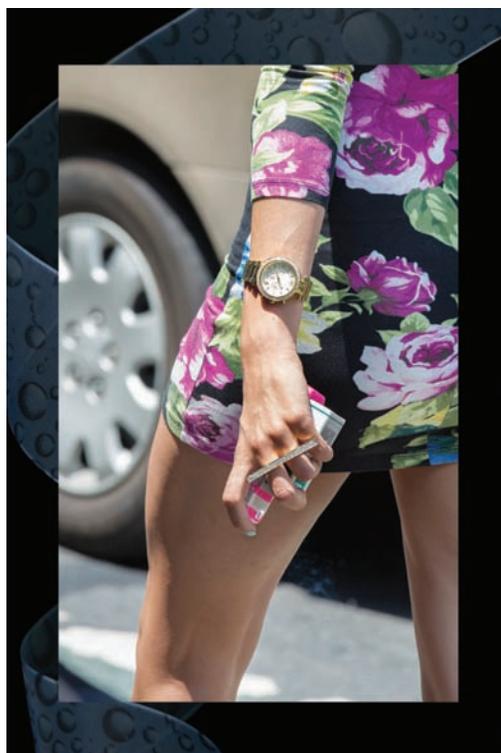
into algorithms and rendered the data visual again as black-and-white grids of Tetris-like pixels. *B&W #01* and *B&W #05* seem like rudimentary abstractions at first, but become more intriguing as you contemplate their source: shadows thrown from a virtual realm into a physical one. In *B&W #06*, transparent prints of office buildings and water are applied to the glazed surface, a strategy repeated in *B&W #04* and *B&W #02*, but for me these appendages detract from the mystery of not knowing the origin of the 'host' image, introducing a different axis of representation. This supplemental tendency is also evinced by the inclusion of works from two further series, *Boat* and *Street* (2014), which feel like arbitrary cameos rather than integral components of the show.

In the Balfour Mews space are eight photographs from the *Jungle* series. In each case, the same image – tropical plants shrouded in mist, watermarked '2014' – is reprinted but differently cropped, and rectangular ceramic tiles are fixed to the glass in a configuration that quotes Marcel Broodthaers's retabulating of Mallarmé's poem 'Un Coup de Dés Jamais N'Abolira le Hasard' (1897) as a set of black stripes in a book of 1969. It's a rigmarole,

conceptually speaking, but the development of the image beyond the picture plane is more considered here than with the *B&W* series, the tiles reading as a continuous strip across all eight photographs, redacting information from the image but adding new information for those familiar with Mallarmé's poem.

How important is typology to Abeles's process? Perhaps the recurring subjects are decoys: it's not watches that interest her, but the particular part of the body they allow her to focus on. If typological photography – as practised by August Sander or Bernd and Hilla Becher – tends to be stylistically neutral in order to document the subject 'objectively', this is challenged by Abeles, whose serial approach is combined with a formal experimentation that introduces an extrinsic dimension to the image. *Watches* and *Jungle* activate the space behind and in front of the image, and with *B&W* there is an 'elsewhere', an entire metaphysical counterpart. In her best work, something is discovered in the space between the image's capture and its presentation, the camera less an indexical witness to a past event than a means of generating a new one.

Sean Ashton



Watches #37, 2014, archival pigment print, 112 × 76 × 4 cm.
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