

ARTFORUM

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People often think that I intend the photos in my 2014 “Watches” series to relate to fashion photography. But in fact I was thinking about the act of shopping and its significance, and if I had to compare the pictures to a genre it would be that of surveillance photography. Which is perhaps not totally crazy, given the degree to which we’re surveilled while we shop.

I’m interested, though, in why some people see a fashion photography reference there. Of course, these photos do feature clothes, accessories, and the body parts they hang on, but they’re more about time and the verb to watch than about luxury (or subluxury) objects. A photograph by me is not like a Bernadette Corporation picture, for example, or even like one by Roe Ethridge or Christopher Williams, who puncture the surface perfection of commercial photography with certain details that clang against the studium. A connection between my work and fashion photographs could only occur in an environment in which commercial photography and vernacular photography are getting mixed up. People have gotten used to the possibility that fashion photography can be a little messed up, by which I mean technically flawed—out of focus, for example, or oddly cropped—or showing nasolabial folds or age spots unretouched.

At the same time, on social media, apps such as Facetune will help you res up your selfie game by giving you a sort of digispa package where you just swipe to smooth out wrinkles and whiten teeth. For those who want to go an extra step, you can lift those cheekbones and/or fill in bald spots. Amateur photographs, shot with a phone, can suddenly achieve a reasonably high gloss—the vernacular and the professional crosspollinate. So maybe the “Watches” exist at the active boundary between selfies and studio shots, where a reversal of poles occurs and the Coriolis effect kicks in.



Michele Abeles, Watches #1251, 2014, inkjet print, 43 × 29". From the series "Watches," 2014.

“Street style” photos are an interesting way to think through this juncture. This relatively recent, Internet enabled genre grew out of individuals’ desires—obsessive ones, if you want to pathologize—to document and see what people are wearing IRL and on the fly. It quickly became apparent that the photos were monetizable, and so they were subsumed back into a kind of fashion photography you could see on a fashion magazine’s website. But is this actually professional photography? Or is it something like amateur commercial photography? Someone might be getting paid to take the pictures shown on Vogue.com. If they are, it must be poorly.

Another new imagefueled revenue stream is the “haul” video. People started making and sharing them publicly out of the nearly erotic excitement they achieve from purchasing new products. This was hardly considered a career option, but because of the way advertising works on YouTube, you can accumulate income if you review a particular product in one of your videos. For most, this doesn’t add up to much, but for a few haulers it can be a circular ticket to consumption: the money to buy more stuff to make more videos about.

Skill stands out less and less in these imagebased scenarios, because the background against which it exists begins to converge with it (just as the distinction between working and not working disappears). And so photography seems a good test case for all jobs in the current economic scenario. Since skill is less professionally valued, it gets you paid less and less.