

# Michele Abeles

Back in the 1980s, artists from the Pictures Generation were critiquing an increasingly consumer-oriented and media-dominated world. Three decades later, is it time to stop worrying, dump the critique and surrender to the realities of everyday living? One New York-based artist is taking us there (and providing *ArtReview*'s horniest critic with more than a few thrills along the way)...

by David Everitt Howe

During the July opening reception of the group show *October 18, 1977* at Klemens Gasser & Tanja Grunnert, Inc in Chelsea, New York – which was notable not only for it being an especially hot evening but also for the droning cellist seated next to the video of an elephant being cut into pieces by a chainsaw (Dominic Nurre's *Conservative Video Work: Giacometti's Elephant*, 2009–13) – a man walked in, grabbed Michele Abeles's archival inkjet print *Confrontation 01* (2012) off the wall and ran out of the crowded gallery with it, past a gaggle of chain smokers. The photograph in question, sharing the same title as a famous Gerhard Richter work, was seemingly a film still. It depicted a pretty, possibly twentysomething woman taking a bath. Looking a little like a young Shelley Duvall, she peers up from the book she's reading (Leon Trotsky's biography of Lenin), as if she's responding to someone who has just asked her (as is written out in subtitle on the image), "Can I take a bath after you?" The bather's response: "Come on in. Saves water."

The work seemed to have little to do with the exhibition's premise, which revolved around the dubious prison suicides of three German Red Army Faction terrorists on 18 October 1977, unless the protagonist of Abeles's photograph is a charming, leftist terrorist on the cusp of having charming, leftist, terrorist bathtub sex with her boyfriend (kinky!). Markedly unexceptional, the photograph was an afterthought, a footnote even, to the kidnapping itself. Unbeknownst to the gallery or to organiser Birgit Rathsmann, Abeles had planned the theft all along. She saw it as a small way to transfer one culture's trauma to another, and wished to keep it a secret so the event was more 'real', whatever 'real' means to an artist whose whole practice undermines the very idea.

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Abeles is known mostly for her disorienting, large-scale, schizophrenic photographs combining portraits, abstract images and text; or conversely, nude, faceless dudes suspended in what look like the trappings of a traditional studio practice sent out into orbit, with lighting gels, still-life objects and other ephemera seemingly floating in space around splayed limbs, chests and floppy, flaccid penises posed just-so. She's just as infamous, however, for sending model and actress Paz de la Huerta in her stead for the 2010 Rob Pruitt Art Awards, for which she was nominated (though didn't win). Search for 'Michele Abeles' in Google Images and you're just as likely to see de la Huerta as the 'real thing', since every image of de la Huerta contained Abeles's name in the image credit, a scrambling of authorship Marcel Duchamp might find funny – pissing, as the stunt did, on the artworld establishment and its masturbatory affections, much like the Frenchman's urinal did ages ago.

It also, incidentally, pissed on media culture and the free market in general, which so easily turns people into fetish objects, and in the case of celebrities like de la Huerta, tits and asses into high-stakes insurance policies. There is money to be made with our lifestyles, and in that instance at least, Abeles refused to participate, sending in the very embodiment of profit as a handy double.

This is not to say, of course, that Abeles claims some immunity to the market; if anything, she is an accomplice. For her debut gallery exhibition at 47 Canal, *Re:Re:Re:Re:Re* (2011), she found male models on Craigslist, their fit, slick bodies becoming the perfect sex objects for her collection of photographs – objects being the operative word. With their faces removed, they become mere dime-store tchotchkes just like everything else in her compositions. In *Red, Rock, Cigarettes*,

*Newspaper, Body, Wood, Lycra, Bottle* (2011), a model reclines on a table, a newspaper and rock disguising his junk, his fingers filled with dozens of cigarettes. In another, *Pot, Paper, Hand, Lines, Numbers, Table* (2010), a hand and arm are seen resting next to an empty pot, the back wall filled in with lined and numbered paper. What the paper is, exactly, is anyone's guess. It's found in another composition, *Plant, Hand, Paper, Fly, Table, Lines, Numbers* (2009). Though this time, the plant is where it should be, its leaves spilling over another man's limb.

Here, real people are reduced to generic, junk consumer items – wine bottles, wallpaper – and overlaid with a clusterfuck of colour and confusing perspectives meant to emulate digital editing tools, but which in actuality are flesh and blood executions, such as Plexiglas covered in colour gels attached directly to the camera lens. Which way is up is anyone's guess in *Fuschia, Yellow, Green, Blue, Numbers, Body, Cement, Paper* (2010). A gentleman's body is suspended horizontally across the image, with blocky squares of colour marching across the scene. Behind this svelte figure, that pesky paper background appears again, this time cut off illogically in strange places. Though shot in a studio, the whole setup lacks perspective and is notably placeless. Some critics have compared Abeles's work to clip art, though I don't see the association. Her photographs look more like early avant-garde photographs, in which objects inhabit a field evenly with very little depth. I could go on, though it would just be an excuse to linger inappropriately long on hairy armpits and fuzzy nutsacks.

Much to my chagrin, Abeles abandoned her twink army for *English for Secretaries* (2013), her second solo show at 47 Canal, opting instead for more prosaic scenes, such as a fat cat she shot lazing on a carpet, which appears twice in the triptych *Coaches* (all works 2013); in one print it's surrounded on the sides by cut-off slips of digital colour, and in another, it's superimposed upon a colour gradient overlaid with chains. With this exhibition, the artist relied less on new images and more on recycling old ones in a constant process of 'quotation, excerptation, framing and staging', as Douglas Crimp might say if Abeles was part of the original Pictures Generation. *You People's* white brick-patterned foreground, floating above a discombobulating background of text and vague, colourful abstract imagery, also appears

in the corner of *Coaches*. A tacky agglomeration of overlapping, cool greens and blues and the tips of palm fronds appear exactly the same in two prints, though in one, *Transparencies*, Abeles has crudely drawn the outline of a woman's face on its museum glass.

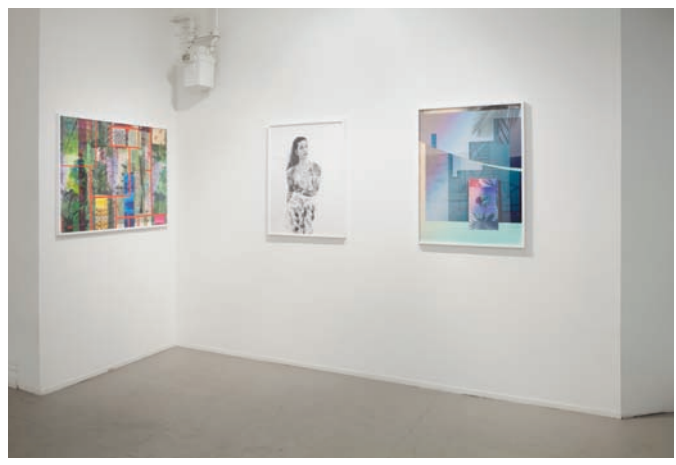
Abeles's recycling of motifs and vaguely identifiable imagery doesn't merely reiterate Crimp's observation that with postmodernism, 'underneath each picture there is always another picture'. Rather, she updates it for the twenty-first century, taking into account the increasing stranglehold of so-called post-Fordism, an economic model based not just on the production of objects and goods, but on relationships and networks – on life itself, really, in which identities are formed by capital from the get-go. It's as if his image-after-image thesis was hyped up on amphetamines, and with her puzzling, hard-to-read surfaces and source material, as if Abeles was letting go

of any pretence towards cogent resistance. Born surrounded by advertising and other forms of mass media, we're clicked in, so to speak – both consumer and consumed, as Cindy Sherman, Jack Goldstein and the others of Crimp's ilk were so attuned to, and so earnestly critiquing. For Abeles, such criticism

seems pointless, even naive, when – to slip into literary terminology – the death of the author at the hands of MTV seems so complete.

Perhaps this is why Abeles faked her own answers for an exchange with Kerstin Brätsch in *Interview*. She and Brätsch collaborated on the scripted responses, crafted carefully out of other people's writings, from Jean-Luc Godard and Grace Jones to Rosemarie Trockel and Richard Prince, among others. Even an offhand comment about the tea she was drinking probably wasn't hers, but someone else's entirely, proving that the brand of Michele Abeles, a type of author figure Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault so carefully deconstructed during the 1970s, is a very slippery, hard-to-pin-down thing. Responding to a series of questions I emailed to her, Abeles expressly told me not to quote her, directly or indirectly, for this essay. Which I guess means I just did, oops. Sorry, Michele! But what does it matter anyway, when her answers, outlined for me in red, might not have even been hers? She LOL'd when I asked, jokingly, where all the naked men went in her work. Last time I checked, 'LOL' doesn't belong to anyone, not even to her. ar

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*English for Secretaries*, 2013 (installation view, 47 Canal, New York).  
Photo: Joerg Lohse