



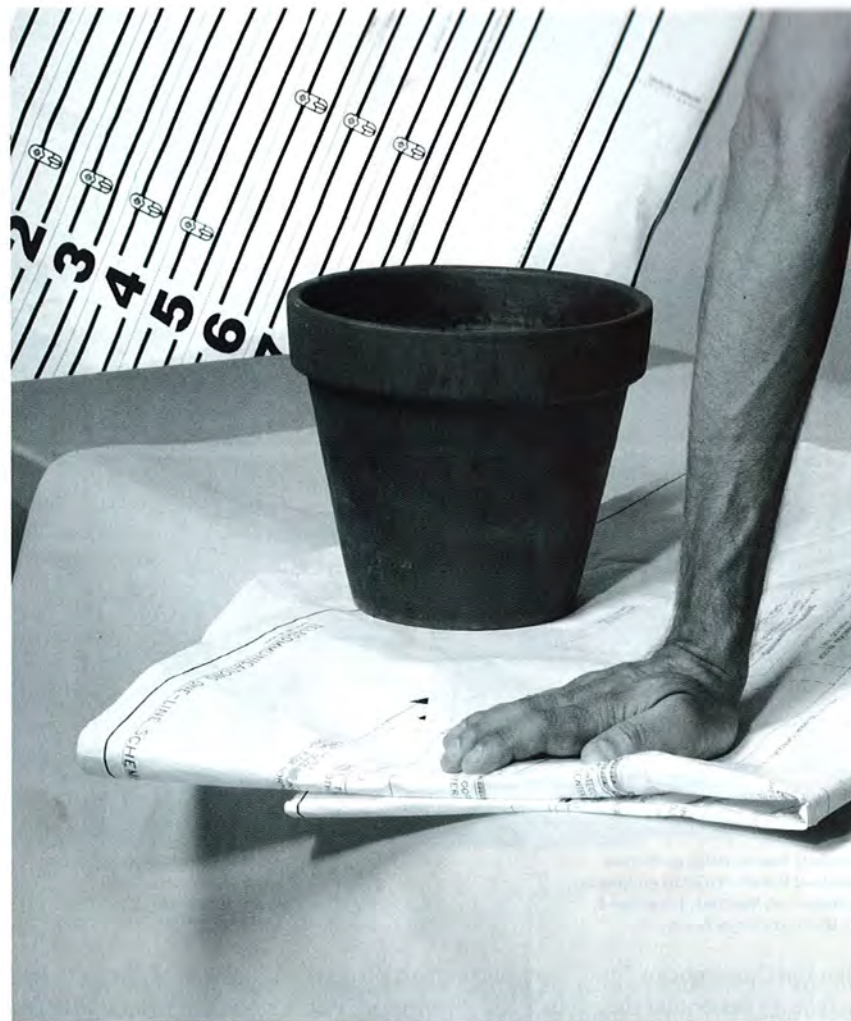
Left: Michele Abeles, *Number*,
Lycra, Man, Hand, Rock, M.L.,
Cardboard, 2009, color
photograph, 18 x 22½".

Above: Michele Abeles, *Pitcher*,
Paper, Arm, Scuba, Lycra, 2011,
color photograph, 31 x 26".

OPENINGS

Michele Abeles

DAVID VELASCO



Left: Michele Abeles, *Hand, Letters, Tape, Magenta, Red, Polyester, Body, Veneer*, 2011, color photograph, 26 $\frac{1}{2}$ x 20".

Above: Michele Abeles, *Pot, Paper, Hand, Lines, Numbers*, 2010, color photograph, 31 x 26".

PAZ DE LA HUERTA is as known for her delirious self-mythologizing as she is for her starring role on the HBO series *Boardwalk Empire*, so it's difficult to say whether the story she tells about her father threatening Larry Gagosian with a knife is true. (Time: 1980s. Place: A loft building in SoHo. Proximate cause: The dealer's hot tub, which allegedly leaked into the de la Huerta family home below.) But the truth of it is, inevitably, beside the point. De la Huerta's invocation of the dealer's name in the service of her own image (downtown girl who's seen it all) neatly complements another recent encounter between the actress and the art world. This time, the gambit was more sophisticated: De la Huerta publicized herself by erasing herself, which is to say, she impersonated someone else in a context in which her ruse was sure to be uncovered. That someone else was Michele Abeles, a photographer who's not quite a photographer, even if, in some sense, she's actually a very

traditional photographer, taking pictures of anonymous subjects in a studio with professional lighting and an expensive medium-format digital camera.

Abeles didn't know anything of de la Huerta's personal history or her TV and film work when the actress's image became briefly omnipresent a year or so ago. It didn't matter. She'd just seen pictures of her online and thought she looked beautiful in one image and really strange in the next. Abeles has a thing for uprooted, "meaningless" pictures. In the 2010 edition of "Greater New York" at MOMA PS1, she showed images that seemed to have been made to resemble stock photographs—an almost pitch-black photo of two dogs and a bright head shot of a fluffy white cat. So it's not surprising that she was drawn to Paz. After all, a celebrity is essentially a stock image, endlessly reproducible, generic, available, disposable. We put stock in these images and put them everywhere. The paparazzi step-and-repeat (that is, the backdrop made

up of enthusiastic tessellations of a sponsor's logo) is the contemporary celebrity's ubiquitous horizon—their native environment and proving ground, even. Abeles thought: What could be more perfect than persuading Paz de la Huerta to be your doppelgänger at Rob Pruitt's 2010 Art Awards? After a cold call and a subsequent meeting, de la Huerta agreed to "play" Abeles at the awards ceremony cohosted by the Guggenheim and White Columns and held at Webster Hall. It would have been genius if Abeles had won the prize she was nominated for (New Artist of the Year) and de la Huerta had gone up to accept it in her stead. But as it happened, Tauba Auerbach took the honor and the imposter only showed up in images dispatched by the Guggenheim's press department. Slipped in among shots of James Franco and Michael Stipe, she stood against the GUGGENHEIM/WHITE COLUMNS/ROB PRUITT'S 2010 ART AWARDS wallpaper and vamped in front of a bland white muslin backdrop. I'm not sure



Paz de la Huerta posing as Michele Abeles at Rob Pruitt's 2010 Art Awards, Webster Hall, New York, December 8, 2010. Photo: Roger Kirsby.

that the Guggenheim “got” that it was an art project; maybe it’s better that they didn’t. Isn’t “getting it” just another way of being goosed by the system? In any case, Abeles gave them what they wanted.

ABELES HAD HER FIRST SOLO SHOW in April, at 47 Canal in New York. It had a clever title: “Re:Re:Re:Re:”—a thread without a subject. A self-perpetuating conversation about nothing, or something like that, not that we haven’t heard enough from the *New York Times* about the emptying out of the subject or the degeneration of our public discourse. Though maybe that’s not what she’s getting at—maybe it’s more like we’re being dropped into a conversation, in medias res, about which we know nothing, which is the exact situation of art for most people.

The photographs on view were crisply staged mise-en-scènes, many involving colored gels in a Malibu-cool fluorescent palette; wine bottles with the labels removed; terra-cotta pots; little snippets of newspaper and the *New Yorker*; unusual garment-district-found fabrics; cropped, nude, recumbent male bodies; etc. Each of the elements has a radically different relationship to the surface of the image—above, on, behind—so much so that the “layers” often work to flatten the picture, making scale and spatial relation-



Michele Abeles, *Sunglasses, Lips, Head, Reflection*, 2009, color photograph, 20 x 26 1/2”.

ships very difficult to figure out. Most of the trickery occurs in front of the camera, in the studio—gels are cut up into irregular pieces and placed in front of bodies or objects; hands appear holding numbered cards in front of spooky gift wrap. The arrangement is never random, but it is certainly counterintuitive. (Amid these jumbled “mosaic” images, some photos stand out for the inexplicable conviction of their straightforwardness—take the deadpan classicism of a naked guy sitting in front of a Vornado “Flippi” fan, cooling his crotch, or the witty blue and white still life on view this past spring in the group show “Vide Poche” at New York’s SculptureCenter.) She likes a disorienting, torqued, all-over composition, and she often reuses the same materials. She mostly finds the men who pose for her on Craigslist, and it seems they’re the types who would answer those sorts of calls: guys with shaved pubic hair, things like that. All the stock cocks are flaccid.

As if to further disarticulate the usual figure-ground relationship, she’ll often title her photos by rattling off some of their ingredients. The title *Number, Lycra, Man, Hand, Rock, M.L., Cardboard* concatenates the generic elements of that 2009 image according to the flattened order in which her eye is drawn to them as she scans the composition. The

photograph becomes a sort of rebus that could be read out loud. Against photography’s materiality (the indexical trace of light on film) we have an insistence on iconicity, on the fundamental unmooring of picture from reality.

Not only do these pictures subdue the photograph’s material trace, but they also imply the elision of the photographic machine itself. The best example of this is the only one with a face: *Sunglasses, Lips, Head, Reflection*, 2009, a photo of a dude in pink-camo sunglasses looking at the camera, his odalisque pose reflected in his shades. Abeles and her camera should be reflected in the sunglasses too, but they aren’t. (She shot the photo from behind a panel of mirrored glass.) So it’s like he’s posing for himself, his picture magically taken without anything at all—the disappearance of the apparatus and its operator maybe signaling the eventual obsolescence of the camera in our imagemaking repertoire. We’ll be our own cameras. Of course, the camera is still *there*. And so is Abeles. They’re just out of the picture.

Some pictures leave the camera behind altogether. Take the perfectly strange images Abeles has been making using the automated “contact sheet” feature in Photoshop. She recycles her “stock” photographs (dogs, cats), plugging them in and then letting the

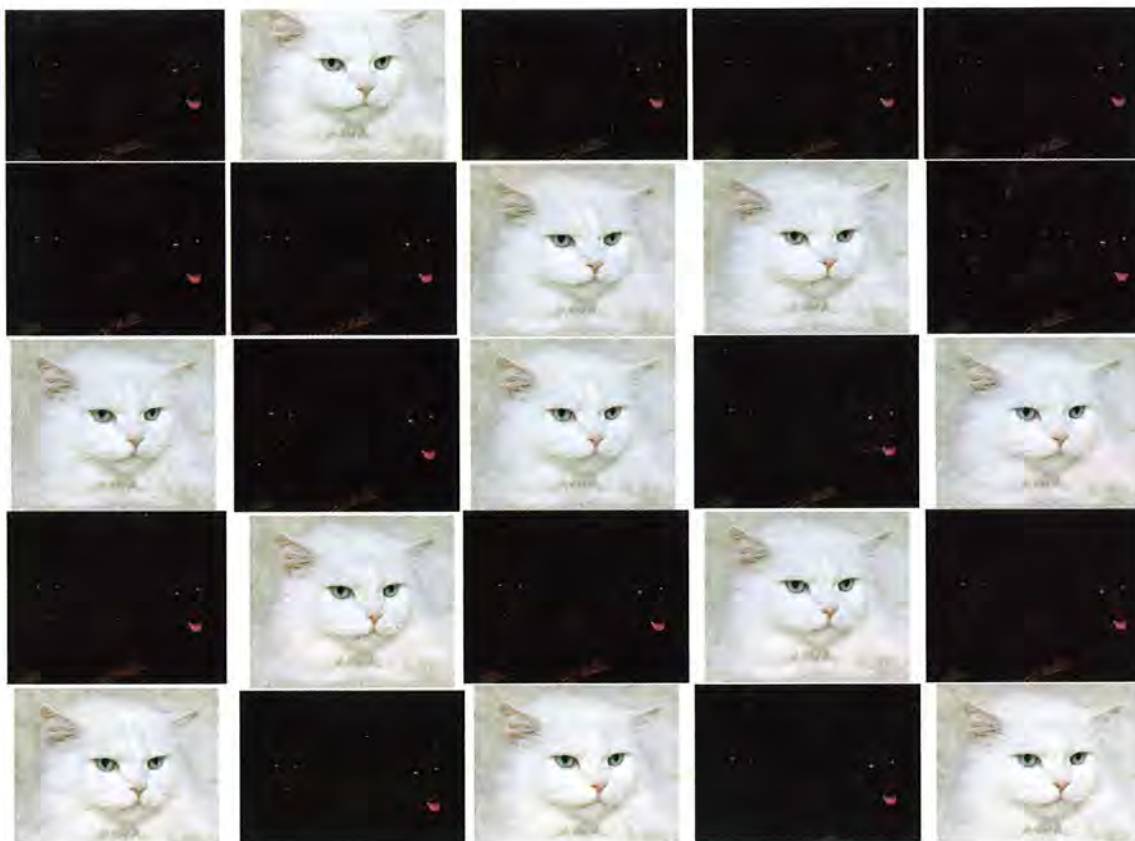
Abeles likes to work the essential tension between the overt staging of, say, a still life, and photography's ontological contingency and immediacy—the medium's supposed connection to the fleeting, the real, the *unstaged*.



Michele Abeles, *Untitled 3 Bucket*
IKB, 2011, color photograph,
20½ x 27".

I Ching of the software sort them into random grids. Today, there's a war playing out on our desktops between the grid's modernist organizational clarity and the additive entropy of overlapping windows. I almost read Abeles as refiguring this battle within and among her bodies of work. Sometimes she'll take it a step further, as in a print that was included in the group show "Skin So Soft" at the transient venue Gresham's Ghost earlier this year. Here, she copy-pasted a few of these contact-sheet images and laid them out on a blank white field, juxtaposing them with a miniaturized *Sunglasses, Lips, Head, Reflection*. When Google Images' grids are our research condition, all photography is stock photography.

Not long ago I did a studio visit with Abeles. She's ambivalent about having a physical studio. Getting stuck in a studio can mean getting stuck in a style, and Abeles, like a number of contemporary artists who are reacting against the imperative to brand oneself, is as averse to a single style as she is to medium-specificity. To stake out a signature style is to settle down in one place. I understand she's had three different studios in the past year. In any case, by now the installation is just another permutation of the studio. Abeles is fully engaged in the conundrums of this relocation, often finding ways of making installation shots into



Michele Abeles, *Untitled (detail)*,
2011, color photograph, overall
12 x 16".

new images. Seven years ago, for instance, Katy Grannan took a nude portrait of Abeles for Grannan's "Mystic Lake" series, and on two occasions since, Abeles has traveled to where the picture is installed and photographed the image in situ. In between the installation shot, the stock photograph, the self-aware self-portrait, and so forth, one senses a lurking suspicion that every image—"candid" photo as much as studio portrait and red-carpet pose—is staged.

Abeles likes to work the essential tension between the overt staging of, say, a still life and photography's ontological contingency and immediacy—the medium's supposed connection to the fleeting, the real, the *unstaged*. She riffs on this with her self-consciously stock photos as well. In Getty Images lingo, there are two categories of stock images: "editorial" and "creative." For the "creative" photos, professional photographers stage and shoot some random but overdetermined subject (a family playing on a beach, a black dog, a white cat) and put the image on the market, hoping someone will buy and "install" it somewhere, giving it a context and thus stabilizing its meaning.

These stray "creative" images need to be found, so of course they're searchable via keywords—Getty Images suggests "concepts," like "innovation," or "human emotions," like "affectionate." The attendant

lists of tags describe the iconic elements and surplus affects of each generic photograph, delineating its potential to glom on to more or less concrete stories. Until an image is harnessed, it means anything and nothing—it is simply a picture of stagedness.

"Editorial" images, on the other hand, connote news, whether of the celebrity or serious type. Abeles's take on the "editorial" stock photo is radical indeed, and to understand it is to get a bit closer to the artist's particular *donnée*. Unlike prior generations of "rephotographers," Abeles meets with her celebrity image (de la Huerta) in the flesh, appropriates not the image but the scene itself (the stagelike space of the red carpet, the graphic backdrop of the *step-and-repeat*), and hijacks the channels for its transmission (the press department, the image search). It's a seamless interruption—a failure to show up that still fulfills the obligations of presence.

Some artists have noticed that pictures don't really have frames anymore. Abeles has, too, and she is working the photograph's restless relationship with its myriad environments today, disputing that line we still draw between what's on the wall and what's on the screen: between the images out there, the images in here, and the images we will become. □

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