

Second Skin

There is no one he likes going to galleries with more than her. There is no one she likes going to galleries with more than him. At the daguerreotype show at the Met she says, 'It's funny how the magic has gone out of photography.' He says, 'Yes, but these seem to be playing a game of hide and seek.' He moves towards a picture whose label reads 'The first daguerreotype' and tries to make out the dark-etched outlines of a figure that refuses to appear. 'I think my eyes are going,' he says, 'I can't see a thing.' She moves nearer to him, so close their heads almost touch. 'Sometimes,' she says, 'if you want to see you've got to believe.'

As they peer at the rectangular metal plate a shadowy brown figure of a man half emerges. 'It's like he doesn't want to show himself,' she says. 'You can hardly blame him,' he says. 'It must have been strange being the first person to appear in two places at once. He probably felt a bit thinned out.' They stand there a while longer waiting for the figure to materialise. 'I wish we knew the secret of making ourselves less available,' she says. 'There's something so deadly about having all these perfectly reproduced pictures of yourself taken over and over again. It's much more powerful if you don't show everything.'

They leave the Met and cross the park on their way to Chelsea. Above them the red autumn leaves stand out with unmatched brilliance against the blue New York sky. He looks up and sees two CCTV cameras attached to a lamppost. 'They're watching,' she says, 'every bit of us mapped and recorded.' 'Every bit?' he says. 'Does that mean they've seen into my depths?' 'I think it means we're not meant to have any depths left,' she says, stooping to pick up a leaf.

In Chelsea every other gallery is showing photography. 'How depressing,' he, a photographer, says, 'when you realise your life's work is just part of a fad.' They traipse from show to show until they find themselves at an exhibition by Wolfgang Tillmans. Pictures of all sizes surround them. Some are huge, tacked casually to the white walls like pages from a gigantic magazine. One of them depicts what looks like a close-up of a blood clot. Another is a grainy shot of some gold bars. 'Now this is depressing,' she says. 'If you're going to batter beauty, at least do it for a reason.' 'You're right,' he says. 'But what's worse is that it's everywhere. Just millions and million of images that pretend to say so much but mean nothing.' They look at more oversized prints and she tries to



Philip-Lorca diCorcia, *Hartford*, 1978 © Philip-Lorca diCorcia. Courtesy the artist and Twin Palms Publishers, New Mexico



JASON ODDY

square what she's seeing with the gushing review she read at breakfast that morning. "You know," she says, "this is like that German woman, you know the boring one we saw in Venice. I'm sure you said that you thought the point of those pictures was to look as artless as possible?" "Maybe," he says. "I can't remember. But I don't think these ones are just trying to be artless. They're trying to be clever too, as though they want to say that photography isn't about looking but about thinking, that it doesn't matter where you place the camera or what you point it at, because content's the only important thing. But the problem is there is no content. They've killed off form and haven't replaced it with anything."

Hiroshi Sugimoto,
Anne of Cleves, 1999
© Hiroshi Sugimoto.
Courtesy The Saatchi
Gallery, London

'WHAT THESE PICTURES SHOW IS HOW A FREEZE-FRAME CAN REVEAL THE LOOK OF DEATH.'



peppercorns. Then for him a risotto of radicchio with figs, lemon and mint. For her a bowl of truffi pasta in a nettle walnut sauce. They don't drink much, not wanting to dull themselves later. She, though, cannot resist a glass of limoncello to make up for dessert. Draining the last drop of the sweet yellow liquid she says, "Wow that was something. That whole meal was super delicious. You've got to admit that that reviewer who said the chef has a painter's palate was right." "Possibly," he says. "You certainly couldn't say someone cooks like a photographer."

Afterwards they head back to Chelsea. He wants her to see a Philip-Lorca diCorcia exhibition he has already seen in London. Now hanging in a cavernous space on 24th Street, the show, 'A Storybook Life', is, he says, "the best thing he's seen all year. The photos, small and numerous, are hung in a line that runs right round the gallery. They move along it together, pausing now and again to consider more closely one of the prints that are variously of people, places and things. Taken over the last quarter of a century some seem to be serendipitous documents. Others look more like carefully constructed images. "These are different," she says in front of a crepuscular suburban scene of a solitary, middle-aged man leaning out of a first-floor window. "There's something unsettling about them. Framed by the light from the room behind, the man stares disconsolately out across his neighbours' roofs into the coming night. Shirt-sleeved and with a cigarette in hand, he seems haunted by an utter lack of destiny."

Apart from the two of them the gallery is empty and, wanting a larger view, she steps back into the middle of the bare concrete floor. She looks at the immaculate row of pictures

and then at him still scrutinising the photo. Something about his pose or about the way the light catches his face makes her sad, as though his gestures were not his own. She wonders if she's seeing him now the way diCorcia would and then wonders too whether her eyes are really her own. Not until he moves on to the next picture, not until he changes position, does she join him. "The way this guy uses light is incredible," she says in a voice so low it is almost a whisper. "He's made it his medium." He turns to her, touched, and says, "Yes they're beautiful, they're so different from those Tillmans we saw earlier. Those just duplicate the world by blindly placing a second layer of imagery over everything like they were designed to stop you seeing or feeling properly or getting beneath the surface at all. But these open things up. They show you something that might be there already but which you wouldn't otherwise see."

They continue along the line of pictures until she says, "It's interesting how they fall somewhere between a personal document and something much bigger. You get the sense that as a portrait photographer he's miles ahead of anyone else - like he's understood how to show something complete about the people he's photographing." "But," he says, "complete" is a difficult word. The problem with so much portrait photography is that it wants to show people as complete, and because of that it doesn't amount to much more than some half-baked species of narcissism." "But that's exactly what I mean," she says. "You look at some of these and you understand that they're not about a person's "character" or about their "humanity" but are about how everyone is inhabited by some sort of inner emptiness. He's using the camera to freeze the masks we put on and show that on some level they're false." "You know



Jean-Baptiste Sabatier-Biot,
Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre, 1844.
George Eastman House, Rochester.
Courtesy Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

those Sugimoto pictures of the Madame Tussauds waxworks?" he says. "Don't these remind you of them?" "How so?" she says. "Well, look at this one," he says pointing to what appears to be a staged photo of an elderly woman in a lift. "The way she's lit makes her look like an effigy. I think both diCorcia and Sugimoto are trying to say that it's absurd to try and capture the essence of something living in a photo. I think what these pictures show is how a freeze-frame can reveal the look of death." She examines the picture of the woman who is gazing off unseeingly into the middle-distance and then turns to him and says, "You're always going on about death, you're so morbid. Isn't this show called 'A Storybook Life'? It's about being alive and about the connections that you make as a result of being alive. It's not about being dead. These pictures work because they've been put together in a way that is mysterious like life is mysterious. Why is your glass always half empty?" "Half

empty?" he says. "But you just said these people are empty. Why are you being so contradictory?" "Well, I'm not exactly contradicting myself," she says, "but even if I am so what? It's not a crime is it? Anyway those Sugimoto pictures aren't about death, they're about time being stopped."

They leave the gallery in silence. When they reach the subway platform he notices that she is crying. "What's wrong?" he says, touching her shoulder. She looks at him through her tears for a long time without answering. Not until later, not until they're well uptown, does she turn to him and say, "Perhaps there are too many photos in the world. Or maybe I've just seen too many today." "I know we saw a lot of crap," he says, struggling to understand. "It's not the crap I mind," she says, "even if trying to plough through it all does leave you feeling a bit numb. It's the stuff that works that's the problem. When you look at some of those diCorcias, like that one of the room with the Christmas tree and all those

'YOU CERTAINLY COULDN'T SAY SOMEONE COOKS LIKE A PHOTOGRAPHER.'

gifts, you feel like they take over." "How do you mean, "take over"?" he says. "Well, I don't know," she says. "I suppose I mean they become more real than anything else. When someone who knows what they're doing chooses to hold a moment like that and then lets you look at it for as long as you want so every detail etches itself onto your brain it leads to a sort of displacement of reality. It almost makes me think that photographs are a form of madness, because they stop you forgetting and sometimes you've got to forget just to move on."

They come to their stop and emerge into the early darkness. As they walk the two blocks home he sees her beside him, eyes cast down in thought. It reminds him of a photo he took of her just after they met. In it she appears totally self-contained, as though she'd never need anyone else. He wonders if this is her truth and something in him grows sad. ■