

frieze

Issue 151 November-December 2012

WIELS CONTEMPORARY ART CENTRE, BRUSSELS, BELGIUM



Leigh Ledare, *Alma*, 2012

Alma (2012) is an image of Leigh Ledare's mother lying naked on a turquoise floral duvet, legs spread, wearing only high heels and stockings. The photograph has been modified by a child's scribbles with coloured crayons. That child, the titular *Alma*, has completely obscured the woman's vagina with green and blue scrawls, and her face with swirls of pink and red. What makes a girl (whom the exhibition guide explains is the child of Ledare's friend, chosen because her parents and the artist considered her 'too young' to 'read' the image) instinctively want to eliminate the genitals and face of Ledare's mother? What role does the child play for the artist? And why choose this image to open his first institutional show, 'Leigh Ledare et al'?

Ledare became notorious for his 2008 book *Pretend You're Actually Alive*, which incorporated explicit images of his mother, Tina Peterson, posing like a porn star or fucking young lovers, interspersed with images of her in hospital and at home without make-up. These were intertwined with tender shots of Ledare with his grandparents, his brother and his then-wife Meghan. As a family portrait, the book troublingly transgresses most taboos. But it is also a fascinating document of the performances of familial and male/female relationships, particularly in relation to female sexuality via the image and media (moments from Peterson's early career as a model also appear). A selection of images from this series are a key part of 'Leigh Ledare et al', a retrospective of sorts, curated by Elena Filipovic.

All of Ledare's photographic and video work is rooted in relationships, sometimes with people he knows, at other times with strangers. The emotional dynamics, social codes and the web of expectations within these relationships are his material. The most affecting of these projects is *Double Bind* (2010), in which Ledare invited his ex-wife Meghan to spend a weekend with him in upstate New York, where he photographed her over four days. Subsequently, he sent her and her new husband, Adam Fedderly (also a photographer), on the same trip, this time instructing Fedderly to photograph Meghan. The resulting images – which Ledare developed and selected himself – are displayed as framed pairs: Ledare's photos mounted on black, Fedderly's on white. Amongst the two photographers' images are collaged found images of couples, porn and other ephemera. Two vitrines sit in the middle of the space: one filled with all of Fedderly's images in piles, the other containing Ledare's. While Fedderly's images portray a far more 'natural' Meghan, in Ledare's images she appears more posed and seems warier of the camera. Surprisingly, the more erotic yet unsettling moments occur in Fedderly's treatment of Meghan's crotch – which is shown in a number of images, viewed from the rear, while her face is buried in pillows or out of view – which Ledare highlights with his selection. Another almost aggressive moment occurs in an image of Meghan taken by Ledare: her face is whited out by a circular glare of sunlight, creating a blank hole on top of her body, juxtaposed with a pornographic image of a man holding his large erect penis. One wonders whether Ledare is attempting to say goodbye to his own painful, destabilizing emotions by performing – and thus conceptualizing – them through the project.

The exhibition also includes excerpts from the series 'Collector's Commissions' and 'Personal Commissions' (both 2008). Both show Ledare styled, posed and photographed by collectors of his work and women he has found in personal adverts, respectively. In the latter, we see Ledare naked, a dog-lead around his neck and fishnet tights on his head. Although these are anything but 'authentic' portraits, the desire for love and sexual gratification – implied in the personal adverts Ledare has displayed below the images – is vulnerable and raw. Ledare's most recent project, *An Invitation* (2012), is the product of a contract with a woman who asked him to be her 'erotic photographer'. He spent seven days at her family home (with her husband) taking one image per day. Each black and white, soft-focus photograph is collaged on the front

cover of *The New York Times* from the corresponding day, with Ledare's handwritten notes below. The most telling one reads: 'Things I want ___not to do mother again. Things she wants ___ to do mother again.'

No matter how performed these situations are, all the works on display seem to constitute conscious repetitions or re-visitations of personal traumas Ledare may have experienced; each time he inhabits a different role, he re-performs this history. In Slavoj Žižek's 1993 article 'Why are the NSK and Laibach Not Fascists', he analyzed the Slovenian performers' use of Nazi imagery and costumes as a form of 'over-identification', arguing that by inhabiting and performing the roles of their totalitarian oppressors, they destabilized and undermined the effect of the original trauma. If applied to Ledare, the perverse dualities he creates by performing these multiple roles also destabilizes the original power politics of his familial relationships, and of the relationship between photographer and subject. As well as the easy comparison to the 'authenticity' of portraits by Larry Clark and Nan Goldin, his work also resonates with feminist photographers' concerns: Hannah Wilke, Jo Spence and Cindy Sherman consciously re-performed biographical and mediatized gender roles in order to destabilize them.

Ledare's most successful works, however, are those in which he uses 'real' relationships as material: the effect is more potent when one knows the work is the result of complicated, messy, lived lives. Perhaps beginning with *Alma* is also the end of a cycle for Ledare: even though it asks how and when we learn to 'read' images, it also makes a melancholy statement that is hard to ignore: can the trauma of 'losing' one's mother ever be resolved?

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