

**Talk by Naomi Cass on the occasion of the launch of the exhibition, *To know a veil* by Hedy Ritterman, Thursday 8 June, 2012, at Colour Factory Gallery**

**HER GIFT TO GIVE**

Making art, like travel, is a kind of navigation of real and imagined hurdles requiring an adventurous, self-questioning spirit willing to take risks. Finding ones voice as an artist requires time and exploration.

Both art and travel permit liberties not usually taken in the hurly-burly of everyday life. Travelers and artists take risks, break rules, take photographs, remember places and revisit favorite sites, indulge obsessions and expend vast resources on achieving their desires. Both return with insights, bringing welcome and unwelcome observations that can upturn the worldview of the more sedate. Hedy Ritterman is both this traveler and this artist.

If we consider renowned travelers who have challenged received wisdom: Marco Polo, Christopher Columbus, Bruce Chapman and in this company, I hardly need mention artists who have similarly done so, but in the hand and eye of this artist/traveller, her observations cause a quiet upturning, but an upturning nevertheless.

And while travelers simply feed their own desires and personal development, artists feed those around them with the mercurial skill of transforming their journey into experiences for others, as Ritterman achieves here. This is the artist's gift.

I would like to consider this world, which Ritterman has so carefully crafted, in which we stand. Let me warn you, there is nothing this thoughtful artist creates, that is arbitrary or haphazard. Here is a most carefully constructed experience for the viewer.

Look at how this gallery has been transformed, how we are greeted as we enter into a confined confronting space, our visual field overloaded with images intruding, bright, large, robust, uncompromising reminiscent of a city street. And we are drawn by a vista towards the end of the space and as we turn around we are greeted by or perhaps trapped into smaller clusters of related works—like the city traveler, we must navigate the space—making conscious or unconscious choices. This is another aspect of her gift to the viewer: to create an enveloping experience.

In *To know a veil*, Ritterman casts a long view over the entire body of her work and creates an installation distilling her voice, in which we can see a number of important threads: a heightened literacy with the history of art in for example, references to Christian Boltanski and Gerhard Richter in particular; a love of analogue technologies and their attendant aesthetics; exploration of digital technologies and their formal qualities.

To focus on the formal qualities of Ritterman's work, there are many things happening here: many technologies and many modes of address or presentation, all of which carry particular meanings: there is a lightbox; printing on canvas; black and white analogue photographs where the grain of the film is visible; large digital prints which, like the monumental banners they depict are lightly held in their frame gently billowing; and a monumental digital print

to billboard fabric boldly stuck to the wall, breaking all museum standards.

This cacophony of forms breaks all the conventions of a photography exhibition and in this respect Ritterman takes a leaf from the book of renowned photographer Wolfgang Tillmans. It's about what you have to say and the means to say it, rather than a bland uniformity.

Driven by an overriding desire to explore photography in its many permutations, Ritterman is easeful in shifting between reportage through to abstraction, from the meaning inherent in the image to the meaning inherent in the photograph as object.

Ritterman invites us to see the world as she does—or perhaps not—she is not preaching a particular point of view. But what is certain, she knows that the act of taking a photograph says as much about the photographer, as it does about the world around.

But I have spoken of all manner of things, travel and art, photography and installation what of the world she depicts?

I have been conducting an experiment this evening. For the last few minutes I have not mentioned the female body and yet we are surrounded here, and in the real streetscape. Do we notice how women are depicted or are we hardened to the conventional representation of female beauty, which like the strap which pulls this plastic curtain reminiscent of a Victorian corset: representation of women in the public domain is tightly bound by the marketplace and mass advertising.

Beauty in our world is a ubiquitous series of signs and symbols forming a punitive, claustrophobic armature on billboards, bus shelters, shop windows, magazines and small screens. It is a brave young woman, or middle aged, or elderly woman who can avoid the harsh uncompromising judgment of advertising. Herein lies Ritterman's mediation on the politics of representation: the women which surround us are diaphanous, see through, insubstantial, veils through which we see the street or strangely distorted in scale like Alice in Wonderland as she bursts gigantic from her architecture.

While the most present and real figure is the beautiful image of an older woman comfortable in her form, descending the stair.

Finally, I am drawn to the billboard image, *New York, 2010 standing in No Man's Land by Christian Boltanski*, which kind of underpins Ritterman's meditation. Faced by the physical and moral enormity of Boltanski's installation (which is about facing the fact of genocide), this diminutive photographer, artist, Jewish, woman and traveller, tells us in a work which is far from reportage—that she cannot fully focus on what she sees and feels and, she let's the camera speak: and we have the most beautiful flower like, enigmatic image.

Bound by an intelligent eye for composition, for irony and the politics of representation, Ritterman cannot help, but lift the veil.

Naomi Cass

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