

WARPED

*A diva is never alone; her solitude is peopled
with reflections of herself.*² – Wayne Kostenbaum

Amy Adler is an artist of the late nineties and a child of the seventies. She works in the wake of postmodern photographic practice, post-queer chic, post p.c., and post the rise of so-called “new genres” art school classes which emerged in the late 1980s to redress the breakdown in the academic hierarchy of media. As is true of the term installation art, the institutionalization of a politically selected, non-descriptive term—“new genres” implying both freshness (new) and cross-breeding (genres)—to describe the heterogeneity of art practice seems weirdly beside the point for most young artists working at this moment. As an artist who makes photographs, Adler is a third generation away from straight photography. Her work falls somewhere between Catherine Opie (a student of California photographers Henry Wessel and Robert Heineken), with whom Adler studied briefly, and the now proliferating generation of photographers taking color pictures of usually manipulated situations. Adler’s is a hybrid practice devoted to the photographic object, its surface, history, and reproducibility. Her photographs are unique, performative, and completely constructed—that is, their origin is intentionally obscured and eventually recast as a new subject with a revised history and authorship. The artist views her source images, photographs lifted or taken, as film stills of subjects in character. Resolutely the photographer of a subject which is inscribed both by its drawn quality and by the act of its own making, Adler locates herself on both sides of the camera.

It’s a little hard to name what Adler does. Through what critic Liz Kotz has recently called an “... aggressive cancellation of prior stages,” she makes drawings of photographs, which are then photographed and manipulated in the computer and result, finally, in unique photographic images, which are printed glossy and framed. The generative drawing is destroyed and the picture has the uncanny look of a drawing with a photographic surface: a drawn photograph or a photographic drawing.

That the drawings are destroyed when the photograph is finished is an erasure that parallels the trauma which Adler’s project redresses. Their demise (the death of the previous author) is anticipated at the moment the drawing is finished. The assertion of the artist’s hand into her revisionist pictures is part of her renegotiation of the

Richard Prince
Untitled (Living Rooms) (detail), 1977
The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles
Purchased with funds provided by the
National Endowment for the Arts, a Federal
Agency, and Councilman Joel Wachs

In terms of Adler's work, there are several striking things about this disturbingly unresolvable story. In addition to the children's extreme beauty, which seems to blind the narrator and the reader to the verity of what unfolds, one of the most resonant themes is physical and emotional isolation. This is most searing at the moments of visitation by the tortured spirits of the dead lovers whose agenda is apparently to reclaim the souls and bodies of the young Miles and Flora. A crystalline stillness falls when the first spirit appears: "An unknown man in a lonely place is a permitted object of fear to a young woman privately bred.... It was as if... all the rest of the scene had been stricken with death. I can hear again, as I write, the intense hush in which the sounds of evening dropped."⁶ Thick and physical, the silence permeates and divides the space. The palpable layers of space James constructs around his characters are also relevant in considering Adler's dark theater. The walls of the mansion agitate and confine the psychodrama as does the interiority of Adler's pictured spaces. The viewer is actively distanced from the subject of each work, and the artist's relationship to the subject is one of aggression and absorption which ricochets around the space she creates. In *The Turn of the Screw* the governess/narrator often describes herself as a medium for projection: "We were cut off, really, together; we were united in our danger—I was a screen—I was to stand before them. The more I saw the less they would. I began to watch them in a stifled suspense, a disguised tension, that might well, had it continued too long, have turned to something like madness."⁷ That she physically occupies a different narrative space than the children also means that her first-person narrative, the usual voice of gothic fiction, is unreliable.

There are other elements in the story through which Adler's work might be read, such as the fact that the nature of the children's relationship with the ghosts, the authority figures, is never clear, its implications eroticized by the veiled language and the instability of the governess's retelling. The gothic trope of the haunted house may,



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John Currin
Carol, 1996
Collection Dean Valentine, Los Angeles

in fact, be the inscription of the possibly incestuous, homosexual or at least psychosexual pairing engaged in by the children and the adults. The architecture of the house as it alternately conceals, reveals and swallows the spirits into velvety blackness is also important. In Adler's series, *Once in Love with Amy*, the hearth and garden, elements digitally returned to the photographic background, are fragments which directly reference the gothic. But the complex layering of the story, the confusion of the narrative voice, proves

most useful in understanding Adler's relationship to her subject which, in various guises, is herself.

Born in 1966, Adler grew up in a cultural context which included the unveiling in 1969 of Marcel Duchamp's *Etant Donnés*, the brief emergence of photorealism between 1970-75, and Andy Warhol's mainstreaming of the portrait. It is not insignificant that Adler's art is made in Los Angeles where the recent history of art includes pop painter Mel Ramos's smooth pin-up girl/women, the images and radicalizing moment of *Womanhouse*, the body-based practice of Bruce Nauman, and the eccentric archive of the Museum of Jurassic Technology. More than identifying with her contemporaries in photographic practice, Adler aligns with a group of artists, mostly painters, who have emerged in the nineties and are self-consciously returning to figuration as a way to invoke nostalgia and import content. John Currin, for example, nurtures a style of painting that is at once insipid, kitschy and academic in order to embrace his usually female, often highly sexualized subjects in an obfuscating patina. Currin's preoccupation with a typology of femaleness and aging, or Elizabeth Peyton's psychophantic jewel-like paintings of Kurt Cobain, is not only about nostalgia and desire but also a projection of the artist's own need to stabilize the manufacture of identity.⁸

Programmatically related to Chuck Close and conceptually akin to Charles Ray, Adler's work can be seen as an evolving body of self representation. She situates the juncture of identity in adolescence, crafting images that lead up to this moment and hover around it. We see, for example, a girl's body move from the flat-chested, pretty *Baby*, whose trunk possibly doubles as that of the idealized, pre-pubescent boy in *After Sherrie Levine*, to coy pre-teen, to voluptuous teen, then pictured in a moment of extreme sexual vulnerability and passively endured sexual and photo-

Fox, 1995
Collection Eileen and Peter Norton,
Santa Monica



graphic objectification in *Once in Love with Amy*. Not unlike Ray's spectacular pink lady, *Fall '91* (1992), Adler's girls and boys are isolated spatially so their presence is somehow greatly exaggerated. Her vision of corporealized adolescence threatens to spill over into our space, to become uncontained by the drawn body and the photographic surface. Seen another way, Adler/we are the enormous voyeurs, peering-in on subjects frozen in an Alice in Wonderland-like isolation. Limbs are large, bodies are looming, too big for the space they occupy.

The return of portraiture and the strategy of evolving a body of work which operates as a kind of psychic self-portrait, has enabled a new, highly personal content to be reinstated in work of the nineties. The artist as benign monster continues to be a trope explored by Ray, Robert Gober, and Cindy Sherman, but also more aggressively by an emerging group which includes Douglas Gordon, Richard Hawkins, Mariko Mori, or Adler's classmates Martin Kersels or Kurt Kauper, whose fabulous, androgynous divas are barely disguised stand-ins for the artist himself. These artists allow the mess of their fantasy or narcissism to infect the narratives they represent.

The reassertion of the self in the guise of the portrait or self-portrait can be seen as a kind of drag or camouflage. Crossing over into the well-worn and muscular territory of realism allows the artist to inhabit the world of the apparently knowable. Described by the generalizing marks of pastel, Adler's figures are there and not there, masquerading as flesh and bone. In one of her most powerful images, *Raising Your Gifted Child*, the artist is recast as Jodie Foster playing the mother of the gifted boy in her film *Little Man Tate*. Rendered in black and white, the child might be the same boy in Adler's *The Problem Child*. The two enormous, foreshortened hands of the Jodie Foster/Amy/mother figure encircle the boy as they both emerge from, and are engulfed by, her paisley skirt and the Indian rug on the floor. The inversions are hypnotic and built into the operation of the work: the artist as a performer whose sexual identity is problematized, playing a single mother, a gifted mother's boy, in a film which was the actress's directorial debut. All are the subject of a work that is both a drawing and a mediated photograph—film still, drawing, photograph, fiction.



Mel Ramos

Bonnard's Bath, 1979

Collection Mr. and Mrs. Kirk Wayland, Oakland

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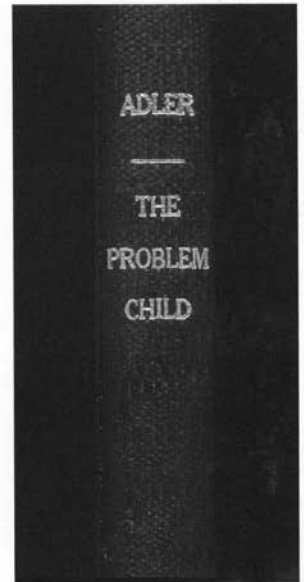
New York, New York

Adler has used Jodie Foster in one other work titled *Fox* (1995). In this picture, Foster's serious, pretty face is out of focus and her wispy blond hair blows back à la Farrah. She is immediately recognizable as the endlessly circulated, *Taxi Driver*-era face of teen magazines circa 1975. Simultaneously picturing her, as Adler repeatedly pictures herself, as the coy blond of teen boy fantasy and lesbian fantasy romance novels of the 1950s and 1960s,

embodies precisely the duality at the core of Adler's investigation.⁹ The object of desire is the lure; the construction is the same for the same presumed viewer. Interested in a kind of typology of beauty and desire, Adler has also made works using River Phoenix, Mariel Hemingway, Dolly Parton, and Leonardo di Caprio, all individuals whose sexual identity remains publicly elusive. They exist in the distance. We are attracted to them, yet they are inaccessible and, through the proliferation of their images, are made generic. Circling between the ordinary and the specific their faces are blank screens for identification. It is Adler's redrawing which realigns the image in the artist's control.

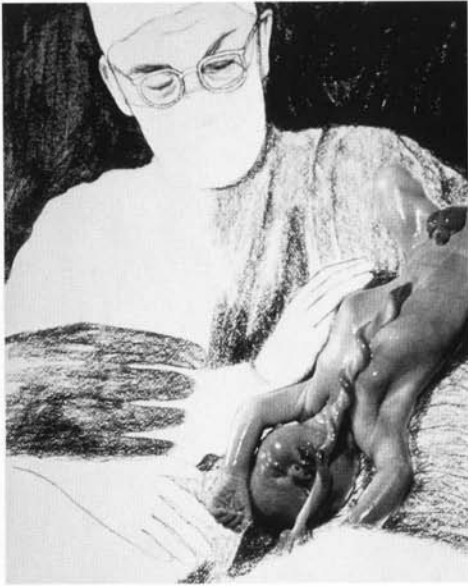
Adler says she draws as well and as accurately as she can. Her stylized drawing technique is part of the meaning of her work and the process of drawing is as critical as the photographic manipulation which happens in the computer. The style recalls the 1970s—the Breck-girl hair, the blank, unarticulated limbs, the feathery pastel and bland, earthy tones seem to smooth over tumultuous change both culturally and within the emerging identity of the teen subject. More John deAndrea than Richard Estes, Adler embraces the artificiality of photorealism in her stiffly drawn replication of a banal snapshot or a studio photographer's unimaginative portrait. This allows her the freedom to sometimes simply reframe her subjects just as they were, leaving almost everything else to projection. For example, in her stunningly creepy picture of a boys' crew team, the boys' trunks form a black hole in their undulating, adolescent bodies. As we look at them hanging in the black background, their feet dangling limply, the genital area, the emblem of their pent-up sexuality, disappears. These happy boys morph into predators and an otherwise ordinary moment becomes ambiguous and charged.

The Problem Child, 1995
The Saatchi Gallery, London



Adler's pictures of boys are often identified according to type: *Lifeguard*, *King*, *Team*, *Crew*. Generally, where a girl is the subject the title signals a greater complexity: *Very Lolita*, *What Happened to Amy?*, *Raising Your Gifted Child*, and *Once in Love with Amy*. *The Problem Child*, a series of six pictures of pre-teen boys at play, is also the title of another Adler picture of the spine of a book, *The Problem Child*, by the child psychologist Alfred Adler. Bracketing the series of boys, the red spine, photographed rather than drawn, provides one footnote for the artist's work. In another photograph Adler selects the psychologist's *Nervose Karakter* which has also become the title of her most recent work, a monumental series of twenty-four head shots of the artist. The compounded reference to the analysis of the child by the patriarchal, authority figure pushes the reading of the problem child as artist. That is, the gifted child or misfit can be read as a metaphor for anyone extraordinary who is marginalized from the myths of the perfect childhood, from adolescent rites of passage like being pictured with the crew team.

In 1996 Adler made *What Happened to Amy?*, five pictures made after photographs taken of her by a stranger, an older man, at the summer retreat of Fire Island, New York. The color of this series is a saturated earthy yellow, possibly a reference to the ubiquitous earthtones of the era in which the original photographs were made. It is also possibly the color of overexposed or aged photographs. The title of the work gives away the subtext, that the pre-teen girl is Amy, and implies that there is something wrong with her. Or, perhaps the title is the innocent yet cloying remark grown-ups make to kids when they sprout with hormones at this age; Amy has blossomed into a young woman. And, as the subject of the admiring adult, she alternately almost poses and almost hides, her attitude between coquette and tomboy. Her hair is boyishly parted too far to the side while her sundress billows suggesting what's underneath. The fact of the repetition makes us suspicious of the photographer's motives: who takes such posed pictures of a little girl? That this ambiguity exists in the age of Jock Sturges or Sally Mann, whose romanticizing images of nude girls are far less disturbing, is worth noting. The authorship of the original photograph is erased and the artist herself asks "What Happened to Amy?"



Family of Man, 1997
Collection Laurence Rickels, Los Angeles

In her recent and extensive series, *Once in Love with Amy*, Adler takes on perhaps the most difficult subject of all. The drawings are of the oldest Amy thus far, age nineteen. They are lifted from pictures made of her by an older woman whose agenda might parallel the male voyeur of the earlier series. She is clothed and watchful in a triptych. In another single image, she is undressing or dressing. In the core five pictures she is fully naked, displayed on a table which comprises part of the photographed background. Part coffee

table, part medieval torture device, the dark wood table frames her white, post-adolescent body.

What is striking is how still the pictures are. The dropped-in background remains crystalline and apart from the more lifelike, drawn girl. It is as though the re-drawing has encased her, that the drawing itself forms a kind of airless vitrine. The junctures where her body or pant leg touch the ground are barely convincing in a way that makes her more statuesque. She is oddly weightless and gravity-bound at the same time. Emotional detachment is reflected in her face. Is her passivity part of the rewriting of the script of this scene or is the psychological complexity part of the original relationship of photographer and subject? The line between performance, re-performance, and persuasion is blurred beyond understanding.

What is our situation as the viewer of this scene? Adler's subjectivity is so strongly felt that it is clear that the recuperation of the narrative was somehow traumatic. As with Miles and Flora, the situation is charged with an erotic of not knowing whether anything or nothing sexual occurred. The hinted-at aggression is in the fact of the photograph—both the original and its carefully made-again copy. Adler says of this series that she was looking for a subject with this built-in aggression, where the stand-off that normally exists between herself and her amazonian subjects was implicitly embodied in the narrative and caught in the interior space of the photograph.

Cornelia H. Butler, *Associate Curator*

NOTES

- 1 From "Five Comments," *Blasted Allegories*, ed. Brian Wallis (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, and Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1987), 92.
- 2 From Wayne Kostenbaum's, *The Queen's Throat: Opera, Homosexuality, and the Mystery of Desire* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 115.
- 3 Gerald Marzorati, "Art in the (Re)Making," *Art News* (May 1986): 98.
- 4 There is some parallel here regarding the initial rejection of photorealism, particularly by academic painters, as obscene because of its reliance on the photograph and the supposed emptying out of subjectivity. What has occurred in the meantime, of course, is the revelation of the subjectivity of the photographic lens. For a discussion of the original reception of photorealism see Linda Chase, "Existential vs. Humanist Realism," in Gregory Battcock, ed. *Super Realism: A Critical Anthology* (New York: E.P. Dutton and Co., Inc., 1975), 81-96.
- 5 Young writers such as A.M. Homes and Beth Nugent have reinvested the minimalist, contemporary gothic narrative with a radical, gritty girl realism. Works such as Homes's *In a Country of Mothers* and Nugent's *City of Boys* are important references in terms of the tone of this brief discussion about Adler's work in relationship to genres of fiction. Homes has also written effectively about contemporary photographers in the publications *Artforum* and *Blind Spot*. After much discussion and trading of books, the artist and author decided against including contemporary fiction in this publication.
- 6 Henry James, *The Turn of the Screw and Other Short Fiction* (New York: Bantam Books Inc., 1981), 20.
- 7 *Ibid*, 34.
- 8 In a recent discussion the Los Angeles-based painter Adam Ross made the interesting observation that the return to portraiture and figuration is an east coast (New York) manifestation of the genre of landscape on the west coast.
- 9 The title of this essay is taken from a popular series of men's pulp fiction novellas of the same era. The lesbian, butch femme relationships in these novels were intended for the male audience. For a discussion of this genre see Jan Zita Grover, "Dykes in Context: Some Problems in Minority Representation," in Richard Bolton, ed. *The Contest of Meaning: Critical Histories of Photography* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1989, paperback edition 1992), 163-196.