

Beyond Glamour — Melancholy Behind the Glitter

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Hollywood. The more glittery the light, the darker the shadows in the fabric, the mass-produced dreams. The more realistic the film, the more virtual reality seems to be. You can lose yourself in both, but in the movies, the actors always show the way while reality often seems planless and lonely.

Some, however, are helpful in that they play their ascribed roles, just as do the engrossed figures in Stefanie Schneider's seemingly faded images, figures who reenact the ostensibly private poses of divas and pin-ups in overdone outfits. These guises are both garish and fragile, found in a calculated pool of requisite gestures, while the girls play to the viewer as though unwatched. The photographs perfectly stage the elegiac ambiance of magical melancholy and deftly engender a false sentimentality that they simultaneously debunk.

It is such pin-ups that have survived all glamour in sailors' rooms and rec rooms for they, particularly the soldiers, plaster their lockers with the girls or take them folded up in their bags while defending freedom throughout the world and while exporting Western ideals to remote lands. The government even sends three-dimensional, breathing pin-ups to entertain the troops on the front. They, too, are a piece of Hollywood, and they, too, change with fashion. Every generation needs an updated version to place the fulfillment of man's longings and fantasies within reach. Generations of photographers have perfected these icons, but the Casablanca-born Jacques Olivar is principal among them, an expert in interaction with longstanding celebrity-status models. Cindy Crawford, Monica Bellucci, Sophie Dahl—they carry on the bedroom eyes, the pout, the lascivious sprawl, the seduction of slightly parted lips. These archaic charms are so expertly transported by today's dream women that one could even believe they invented them.

"Women are born to be art," the Chinese Yang Yong from Shenzhen seems to say to Jacques Olivar. The quickly growing metropolis near Hong Kong offers everything that makes for a modern, swank life of breathtaking artificiality, but for all that—or exactly because of it—every corner reveals gaping holes of paralyzing boredom, where the protagonists of Chinese photography's picture stories cower. Yang Yong's models are young women from the province, friends of the photographer who often finance their existence through prostitution and with whom he spins a kind of high-gloss romance of his impressions of loneliness. The products are series such as "Diary of a Dreadful Youth,"

a portrayal of a typical day in the "new urban life," that conveys the image of tristesse in luxury and give an account of the conflict between predetermined social roles and the vacuum of a metropolis culture molded by the West.

Travel begins each of Wojtek Wieteska's visual experiences. His ambition to create an authentic impression of his specific location in the form of "photographic essays" sends him on the search for coincidental, spontaneous images. His impressions are consolidated through the lens into collage-like, visual stories of light and shadow.

Jan Wandrag discovered a similar urban existence of American coinage in his "non-straight street photography." Non-straight has a dual meaning because it does not adhere to the visual ethos of pure, direct and unedited photography, and because it establishes a homosexual perspective. The attractive young men that Wandrag captures begin to take on their own lives in the images, robbed of everyday time and transfigured loosely into the biblical figures of David and Jonathan, who appear in this environment as profane as they are current.

Equally bacchanal, Holger Jacob's computer-aided impressionism and saturated aesthetic hold the ubiquitous, erotic phenotypes at bay. With a creamy sensuality that cajoles the eyes as well as the memory, he fondly stages the color and, within the colors, the über-woman of whom it was once aptly said that she is no more and no less than an "auspicious and yet unpromising, raspberry-colored gesture."

The glitter of the glamour world initially seems an attempted deception of an industry of yearnings, the production of which now runs smoothly after years of perfection. But glamour's focus on exteriors immediately raises questions about the interiors. The sleekness of the exterior's thin shell reveals even the finest flaws, in which art photographers like Stefanie Schneider and Yang Yong embed their positions in their own idiosyncratic ways. Others, like Jacques Olivar or Holger Jacobs, are content to bestow their fascination with glamour with an unbroken but modern façade.

And yet others, Jan Wandrag for instance, use image manipulation to transform the objects of their own desires, desecrated in everyday life, into film-worthy icons, while the glamour in Wojtek Wieteska's city scenes fuses with a quotidian banality. Glamour is a phenomenon that demands an attitude and, likewise, offers as many numerous enthralling perspectives. October 2006