



ARTIST

Patti Ambrogli

TITLE

Untitled, from the series 'The Nature of Culture; Freeing Female Representation, Can She Take Her Tail Off?'

DATE

1992

DIMENSIONS

16 in H x 60 in W

MEDIUM

Silver-dye Bleach Prints

IMAGE NOTES

Fujichrome Print Marked A-C

CATALOGUE NUMBER

1992.003

CURRENT LOCATION

1620-11C

PATTI AMBROGI

BORN

1950

BIRTHPLACE

Albany, New York, NY

GENDER

Female

CITIZENSHIP

United States

CULTURAL HERITAGE

European-American

LIGHT WORK RELATIONSHIP

Artist-in-Residence, 1979
Light Work Gallery, 1979
Alternative Imaging Exhibition and Workshop Robert B. Menschel Gallery, 1993
Light Work Gallery, 2002
Video Exhibition

LIGHT WORK PUBLICATIONS

Contact Sheet 7
Contact Sheet 73
Contact Sheet 97
Contact Sheet 122
Menschel Gallery Catalogue 31
Exhibition Catalogue: Alternative Imaging

BIOGRAPHY

For a more recent CV or bio please visit the artist's website, <http://www.pattiambrogiphotography.com/>

ESSAYS

In December of 1989, Patti Ambrogio was issued with four complaints of alleged child abuse and pornography. These charges were brought against her anonymously for the 'potentially offensive' way in which she had photographed her children naked and at play in the family's garden. An investigation of Ambrogio's household was conducted through the District Attorney's office by the Child Protection Services Agency. While the investigation proved the family unit to be healthy and far from abusive, the debate as to the validity of Ambrogio's photographs continued. Reviews and letters to the editor in the local newspapers created a dialogue around the issues of child exploitation, feminine nudity, the ethics of fine art photography, and censorship. This experience and the debate that followed formed the context for the work Ambrogio completed during a residency at Light Work in December 1991. During this time, Ambrogio created two large installation pieces entitled *The Subsuming Nature of Culture*; *Freeing Female Representation, Can She Take Her Tail Off?* and *X's and O's; The Sun and the Earth*. In *The Nature of Culture*, one sees a seductive mermaid from a Kodak advertisement and one of Ambrogio's twins, each on a rock slab. In some images, Ambrogio creates double exposures melding woman and child and in turn the media with the more private realm of her own representations. This layering technique fades in and out contrasting the publicly 'accepted' representations of the female- specifically that used to sell a product- with imagery of feminine that many consider 'unacceptable'- the natural nude child within the domestic sphere. In *X's and O's*, Ambrogio begins with candid photographs of her twins at play in nature- these photographs are not staged, and show uninhibited play. On each print is a painted X or O referencing the game Tic-Tac-Toe and in turn the randomness and the limiting strategies of censorship. The text, excerpted from the writings of Mary Calderone and Kate Millet, layer a critical analysis of the sensuality of children as 'real,' and the cultural implications of denying sexuality as seen through the child pornography debate. The duality of Ambrogio's role as mother and as photographer/observer afford a unique perspective as she brings into question how, and from what sources, feminine identities develop. Ambrogio's photographs question the ways in which our culture censors and denies the presentation of sensual and sexual personas in children, and suggests that in order for women and children to develop healthy and strong identities they must be able to acknowledge and celebrate these aspects of their feminine self. Amy Hufnagel (c)1992 Patti Ambrogio is a professor of photography at Rochester Institute of Technology, in Rochester, New York.

COVER GIRLS Monica Diana JonBenet Marilyn Jackie Hillary Winona Ryder Jessica Lynch *The Electronic Canvases* Diana, Marilyn, Monica, JonBenet, and Jackie are electronic movies, constructed with interior images and maps. Each canvas plays as a looping QuickTime Movie projected onto a wall through a video projector, creating large, moving canvases. When the work was exhibited at Light Work, it was presented on a 42" plasma screen display. *Cover Girls* generates a lens to redescribe and a pencil to remap our understandings of how media and its imagery creates the phenomenon we think of as reality. The project creates artwork and adventure that looks beneath the surface of official stories and received histories, and toward the discovery of the social and economic processes that shape the roles and relationships of people and power. The work describes art and its technological processes of production as sites where the legacy of these systems can be unraveled, allowing opposing and multiple positions to form and co-exist. Each movie transfigures the gestures of the *Cover Girls* in a well-known media clip, through smaller, interior images. The structure of each frame is resignified through an internal code of icons, bringing to the surface an accumulation of buried meanings that constitutes our larger understandings of the role each woman plays on the cover and in the official history defining her. Marilyn, in the famous subway grate scene, is recreated in smaller images from the parts of a flower. Monica is visualized in the images from the famous tie she gave Clinton, which he wore to the Rose Garden. The labyrinthian icon in the tie historically symbolizes Jason searching for the Golden Fleece, and the four- and five- pointed stars symbolize Aphrodite. Diana is bombarded by flash as she walks before the camera. She is recreated through images of landmines from the major conflicts of the twentieth century. JonBenet is visualized through Barbie trinkets, and Jackie through Warhol's stolen media images of Jackie. The canvases chart multiple layers of meanings that exist between the life of each woman and the various histories that she shapes. My ambition is to realign our values of description with our sense of understanding. Much of the way the world comes to us in media is through inverted descriptions of what we are really experiencing; questions of truth are enmeshed in questions of fiction. I propose a photography that will encode values within its structure. I think of the work as a laboratory project, unmooring language, pictures, and rules from historic practices. I believe that testing the practices, photographs make new knowledge more visible and expressible. I work to unravel and to re-encode our popular images with signs that the world is not just out there a priori, but out there as we construct it, contest it, and remake it. Patti Ambrogio Patti Ambrogio is an associate professor of photography at Rochester Institute of Technology and the creator of Media Café. She has been the recipient of various grants and awards, including the Eisenhart Award for outstanding teaching. *Cover Girls* was presented as part of Light Work's exhibition series in January 2002. Ambrogio participated in Light Work's Artist-in-Residence program in 1991, and for the second time in January 2002 to complete this project. Patti Ambrogio Willie Middlebrook *Abstracted Identities* January 12- March 15, 1993 Identity is not formed by a single idea or a single expression, but rather a myriad of sources and ideas converging and interacting upon the subject. Identity is formed as much by those elements of culture that give it shape as by those elements that disintegrate it. Patti Ambrogio and Willie Middlebrook are grappling, in different ways, with the formation and disintegration of identity. Ambrogio makes images about sexism, motherhood, childhood, sexuality, and censorship, and uses abstraction and photographic manipulation to suggest that these identities and the representation of these identities are not shaped by a single idea or source. Willie Middlebrook is exploring the idea that the ethnic identity of Black male is not formed by a single idea, but is touched and weathered from many directions. Middlebrook's imagery alludes to racism's effect on identity by making pictures of his family, his friends, his community that are powerful and tearful, screaming and silent. Both artists represent their personal and social experience with photographic manipulations that mirror the manipulations of race and gender issues in the more mainstream arenas of image production. Before their most recent manipulated work, Ambrogio and Middlebrook were both making black and white documentary photographs. Ambrogio was documenting her young twin daughters. Middlebrook was documenting the predominantly African American community of Watts in Los Angeles and in another series he documented the homeless. Each photographer was interested in preserving their perceptions for the collective memory, and in offering a view into the respective issues of being female and being Black. Each documented the sphere in which they felt the most comfortable, the most connection and the most conviction; for Ambrogio it was the domestic sphere and for Middlebrook it was East L.A. In both cases, Ambrogio and Middlebrook found that the straight photograph limited their ability to critique or interact with what they perceived and what they recorded photographically. Each photographer wanted to convey an aesthetic language that personalized their experience and their discussion of identity. Middlebrook and Ambrogio felt that identity could not be discussed by a centralized subject or by a single setting, but instead must be represented by issues swirling, fading in and out of focus and prominence, and by any given idea or subject only ever being partially exposed. In their new work, Ambrogio and Middlebrook suggest that they cannot catch that instantaneous moment on film that can epitomize the subject's identity. Instead, identity is transient, never fixed, and always washed by forces that can be identified or by forces that remain just beyond the tangible. By approaching the topic from this perspective, the artists are able to communicate in a way that is in line with their life's experiences. Willie Middlebrook believes that art is about communication, and his communication focuses on the Black male's identity. Middlebrook says, "My drive, my direction, my strong social and aesthetic convictions, from which everything I

do comes, stems from my parents endowing me with strong feelings about the ideas and integrity of being Black.” Middlebrook’s personal history and his strong sense of self provided the foundation for his first documentary series of African American life in Los Angeles. Negative images of Blacks by whites, a lack of Black image makers, and an absence of Blacks in photographs in general, motivated Middlebrook. He has produced images that depict these communities in a “real” light, but to these pictures came the potential for misinterpretation. The same kinds of biases or racist views that are experienced between ethnic groups in LA’s neighborhoods had the potential to extend to the image; in other words, what is valued by one culture may be devalued by another. So Middlebrook abstracted and assembled his own notion of ethnic identity, and in doing so he placed the Black male in a new context and gave him a quite different façade that the one depicted in his earlier documentary work. Middlebrook’s images are individuals who are touched by humanity and by the effects of racism, but this touch is now depicted symbolically. His Black men are strong and defiant in their posture but are washed and weathered, disintegrating and fractured from many directions by the touch of a symbolic “social” chemistry. In this new work, Middlebrook is making the moment rather than waiting for it. He interacts intimately with his artwork, touches it personally, and is a more active participant in the image’s making. Middlebrook paints with light and with photographic chemistry. While the point of departure is a formal studio portrait, the abstracted version is a painted surface similar to that of copper surface when it is exposed to the elements. In the images entitled Portraits Of My People: The Black Male Love Song, we are struck by Middlebrook’s desire to give his subjects strength but to also suggest that this identity is effected by other “elements”. His subjects, and his self-portraits, are touched by racism. His people no longer have “a” personality, or “a” façade, but instead their identity fades in and out and around the multitude of touches that comprise humanity. In the piece “In His own Image,” Middlebrook has constructed a grid that illustrates his personal reaction to the Rodney King verdict. His facial expressions and gestures are those of a Black man as he reacts to watching and listening to the media covering the aftermath of the verdict. He stares into the camera, or at the television set, and puts his hands up to deflect the meaning of the coverage. Middlebrook boxes in his head and thus his thoughts. He covers his mouth, his eyes, and he turns his head to the side as if in defiance. Each gesture counters and reacts to the media representation of Black identity, and in this counteraction, he offers an alternative vision of the Black male identity responding to the verdict. He is washed by racism and his façade is weathered by the repercussions of this mass produced identity. He does not steal, he does not cause destruction, but instead is stolen from and his identity is disintegrated by the knowledge that all things are not equal and that right does not win over wrong.... Especially if you are Black. Ambrogio’s work is also about a need to communicate, and more specifically, her need to communicate about gender issues. In 1989 Ambrogio was issued with four counts of child abuse and pornography as a result of “potentially offensive” way she had chosen to document her children. The photographs that were censored were those that represented her daughters nude and at play in the family garden, bathing, and dressing. Ambrogio was shocked by this public response to her documentary work. She had difficulty accepting that the images of her children where offensive, and yet it became obvious that there were very specific codes and visual expectations for what was appropriate to document in the private sphere and she had broken these codes. While she could rationalize the need to protect women and children, she became aware that a major component of this censorship was the need to manipulate and veil the identities of women and children in order to uphold certain myths about them. It was this veiling, coupled with her own experience of censorship, that inspired Ambrogio to move away from the documentary form and to instead discuss why and how identity is shaped or broken apart by mainstream representations. Central to Ambrogio’s artwork is the idea that women and children where constantly “harmed” by imagery and language in a variety of medias, and that these images and word, for the most part, go uncontested. Ambrogio’s experience sensitized her to the continuous cultural veiling of female and sexual identities that uphold norms and notions of purity and naiveté. While the issues in her new work are similar to those from her earlier documentary work, she has added new levels of interpretation in order to counter the accepted representations of gender identity. Ambrogio’s work has imperativeness to it now, and its agenda focuses on the representation of gender from divergent sources such as academia and her children’s perceptions. By abstracting and layering these sources Ambrogio brings into question how female identity is shaped by a variety of points of view and by many experiences. Ambrogio’s new work mediates sexuality, the female, and the child by layering meaning upon the images of her own children. This work challenges and questions why sexuality is acceptable in the marketplace yet unacceptable to the artist. Ambrogio’s images further suggest that in order to change attitudes toward women and sexuality the entire realm of representation and language needs to be amended. In Jesse’s Pictures, My Father’s Book, images from the book How to Photograph Women fade in and out of her daughter Jesse’s pictures of Ambrogio bathing during a summer vacation. Text of the child’s perception of her mother’s nude body layer the images with a simplistic awareness that identity is made up of representations, and in turn ask the viewer which they are willing to accept as “appropriate” – the mother with her children or the stylized female from the How To book. Ambrogio suggests that both shape female identity, but that in the accepted codes of image making she is encouraged to accept someone else’s representation rather than her own. Ambrogio, however, is not willing to do this, and instead she continues to make images that challenge how gender identity is formed. In the installation piece entitled Not Seriously Injured, Ambrogio excerpts text, from a New York Times article, about a woman who had been raped in the city. She was “cut on her arms and hands, but not seriously injured.” This text is layered upon an image of Ambrogio’s child, and thus on our next generation. Ambrogio’s piece implies that the child is the inheritor of these cultural codes: codes that perpetuate an attitude of ambivalence toward one of the most serious crimes against women. Like Middlebrook, Ambrogio’s portrayal of female identity fades in and out and around the touch of humanity levying a ghostly and amorphous effect on our culture’s women and children. Ambrogio moved to an abstract form to reinforce the content of her work, but also to add layers to the process of making. As an artist, Ambrogio is interested in using a variety of tools and technologies to create meaning, mirroring how meaning is constructed in other arenas of cultural production. Ambrogio employs the Amiga computer’s digital image processing, a haloid copy machine transfer process, and a variety of alternative photographic techniques as the tools to layer her images. Ambrogio’s process works to inhibit the “accepted” language and representations that fuel the contemporary notions of gender and sexual identity. Many of the representations that we perceive of women and Black male in our daily life are freighted with stereotypes and derogatory identifiers. Middlebrook and Ambrogio understand how these depictions work to make many of the qualities of gender and ethnicity appear manipulated and fragmented. For each artist, identity can only become more clear when it is understood in relation to these derogatory representations, but the artists also believe that a vital part of their process has to be to create new representations to take their place. This is the task taken on by Ambrogio and Middlebrook and their photographs are a vital and telling part of this process. Amy Hufnagel Assistant Director, LightWork Willie Middlebrook is the newly appointed Director of the Watts Tower Arts Center in Los Angeles, and formally worked for the Los Angeles Photography centers. This year he received a Visual Artist fellowship in photography from the National Endowment for the Arts. Patti Ambrogio is a professor of photography at Rochester Institute of Technology and lives in Rochester, New York.