

Arla Patch

Portfolio Contest Winner

American society originated from religious groups that were expelled from Europe in the 17th century for their fundamental and puritanical ideologies. Contemporary Americans seem to carry a genetic code that still echoes that puritanical stance. In America, nudity continues to evoke a prurient (aka sinful) desire that colors our experience of the female nude in photography.

The art world in general has been dominated by the male vision, which, with rare exceptions, has expressed erotic, mythological or idealized versions of the nude female. No matter how respectful the photographer is, the images rarely evoke anything other than a male interpretation of female sensuality. Stieglitz's nudes of O'Keeffe, Weston's nudes of Charis, Helmut Newton's nudes of Amazonian models, and Jock Sturges' Balthus-like adolescents all exploit the male-female/sacred vs. profane discourse.

Female photographers who have explored the female nude are often trapped by this male dominant eye, having been submerged in the male-dominant art world. In trying to break this cycle, Ruth Bernhard reduced her nudes to design-oriented figures that lack any emotive response. Others, such as Joyce Tennyson, tried a theatrical approach, making the nude into an allegorical symbol that attempts to romanticize the aging process.

Nudes in general are always about the photographer, rarely about the subject. Arla Patch seems to be an exception to the rule: She is the photographer *and* the nude. Patch grew up in a violent home, and at the age of 11 had a transformative experience in nature that served to sustain her in that difficult environment and, in retrospect, set her on the path to engagement and enlightenment.

Healing is an important aspect of her work. Acutely aware of her own trauma, she sees nature and art as mystical paths that can be expressed through art. Her creative drive appears to move toward the light, much like a plant follows the sun. Nature, art, body, mind, heart and soul are inextricably connected. "The body," says Patch,

"is an antenna for information, both internal and external."

Patch discovered that the body has an intelligence that we rarely acknowledge, and this has informed her image making.

In patriarchal societies, women often have distorted body images that are reinforced by mass media. Patriarchal societies also produce emasculated men who often lash out at women. Women become victims who turn it on themselves. But Patch realized that our bodies are very much a part of nature; a connection that has been lost in contemporary society.

Originally, Patch led workshops for women with breast cancer, helping them make body cast sculptures. Inspired by the combination of the body and natural items (leaves, ferns, flowers) applied to the casts, she had a vision of a woman made out of ferns. So Patch made a series of transparencies of nature: ferns, fire, water, etc., then projected them onto herself. She photographed these projections in the dark, which were detailed in her first book, *A Body Story*.

Working with troubled adolescents and incarcerated women, Patch found that projecting images of nature onto their bodies created a sense of awe and wonder, and the resulting photographs transformed how they viewed themselves. These photographs comprise her latest book *Finding Ground: Girls and Women in Recovery*. Her newest portfolio is the result of projecting her watercolor paintings onto herself and then reversing the images from positive to negative.

Like the ancient art of laying herbs and plants upon the body, Patch infuses the plants with light; ultimately healing her body's self image and celebrating its magic and strength. These nymph-like ethereal bodies could easily appear in Titania and Oberon's forest outside Athens, far from the judgments of mortal man and his puritanical ideologies. The body images are like wood nymphs and fairies: enchanting, playful, mischievous, but ultimately kind and (literally as well as figuratively), healing.

-Lorraine Anne Davis