

EXHIBITION ESSAY

Beyond the Binaries: Crossing the Boundaries of Identity Politics

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A postmodern artist from top to bottom, Barbara DeGenevieve takes multi-signification and overdetermination to their outer limits. Her color photographic portraits/studies of nude African American males displaying themselves on beds in hotel rooms seem to be straightforward enough, although they create an inherent dissonance; her subjects express the distinctive individuality associated with the portrait and the formal elegance that characterizes the study of the nude. We do not know exactly what to make of them when we contemplate them outside the artist's conceptual program.

The meanings of DeGenevieve's images—none of them determinative—reside in the project from which they result. Her subjects are homeless. DeGenevieve finds the men on the street, negotiates a verbal contract with them for a photo shoot, takes them out to eat, brings them to a hotel room where she takes their pictures, has them sign a model release, and then pays them. Aside from her conceptual concerns, she conducts a professional economic transaction—money and goods for services rendered. She is always accompanied by a female assistant who shoots a video recording the encounter.

DeGenevieve means to be provocative and to challenge the conventions of what has come to be called "political correctness." She is aware that some people will see her project as exploitative, according to the familiar binaries; she is white, they are black; she is economically secure, they are on the margins; she is clothed, they are naked; she has the camera, they have their bodies. These culturally charged and theoretically troubled binaries are reversed, of course, in one important gendered dimension; they are men, she is a woman.

In challenging the binaries that have become ingrained into the discourses of cultural politics, DeGenevieve is by no means returning to the traditional paradigms of inequality and domination that were prevalent before the social and cultural changes provoked by the panoply of liberation movements in the 1960s. Indeed, she advances beyond the debates that have become rigidly frozen, opening up new possibilities for relations among social groups and for experimentation with social identity.

That expansion of possibility is nowhere more evident and telling than in the way that DeGenevieve fuses the binaries associated with race, class, and gender in her project in order to question them, raising the ante of identity politics to its limits. As a professional, middle-class white woman engaged in a business transaction—laced with erotic overtones—with impoverished and unemployed black men, she restages in contemporary terms an imaginary associated with racist discourse in which the civilized and vulnerable white woman is imperiled by the figure of the lustful, feral black male. DeGenevieve puts that imaginary to rest once and for all; as the photographs and video testify, she is not threatened and her subjects are far from

being slaves of their desires. Indeed, her subjects are in control of their responses, taking on the role of model, performing it according to their varied temperaments and raising the encounter to a form of play, when they are so disposed.

An inevitable sexual tension resonates in DeGenevieve's images. Her portraits/studies are posed, yet not formalized, allowing her subjects to express their attitudes and emotions (which run a gamut in which slyness and insouciance are the points of gravitational pull), and to dispose their bodies erotically when they wish to do so. Proceeding from an appreciation of the sexual tension—always kept within bounds of discretion by photographer and subject—the viewer is encouraged to add the layered significations of race, class, and gender that the images evoke and to reach conclusions on their own. DeGenevieve has been careful not to make any dimension dominant and has not provided conceptual closure.

DeGenevieve shows us that deconstructing the discourses of domination from within does not involve a new form of control. Her project functions most of all to dispel our social fears; in abandoning the mythologies of domination, we need not shrink back from engagement—we can overcome the constraints of received interpretations of race, class, and gender roles without naively pretending they are no longer socially and culturally operative. DeGenevieve's play with political INcorrectness is lucid, reflexive, and pioneering, breaking into the social terrain that she invites us to explore.

The interpretative openness that DeGenevieve cultivates does not render her images entirely undefined. For all the ample room for exploration that they give us, her images do not lead us back to racism, sexism, or invidious class distinctions, or to the reaction against these identifying markers that can paralyze us and render us incapable of engagement. When we understand DeGenevieve's theory and practice, the indecision that we experienced from her images at first glance becomes an appreciation of the richness that we sacrifice when we put on ideological blinders.

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