

Flash: Whitney Hubbs

September 5–November 14, 2015

Persistent and Falling pictures an anonymous female nude. The subject is extending her left arm as if reaching for something beyond the frame of the photograph. Her legs are tucked behind her. The subject's recently denuded body is striking in its whiteness, but not pristine: an imprint from the seam on her jeans is still visible on her left calf, and her bare feet carry dirt on toes and heel. Two crumpled seamless backdrops, material often used in commercial photo shoots, are spread beneath her, filling the majority of the photograph's frame save a small

white triangle at the top right corner. The picture is divided into thirds. An attentive viewer will notice the distinctive creases of the second backdrop and the line produced by its edge. They create a collage-like perceptual discrepancy that is resolved only by our identification of the subject's foregrounded foot and resulting shadow. By constructing multiple surfaces that converge within this single photograph, the effect is that of montage. The canonical reclining nude is reduced and transformed into an imaged surface among imaged surfaces.



Persistent and Falling, 2015
Courtesy of the artist and
M+B Gallery, Los Angeles

Writing about the work of an artist by considering a single photograph, as I have been asked to do here, seems an almost impossible task. This may be especially true of Whitney Hubbs; the complexity of her work often lies in the sequencing of her carefully composed and printed photographs. Over the years her pictures have described a multitude of familiar photographic subjects—landscapes, portraits, nudes, and still lifes—all of which she has displayed together in exhibition. For the photographer *du jour*, such themes might result in self-referential artworks contingent on their reception as overwrought, ironic emblems that chronicle the various histories and genres of the medium; at best, critics might contend, such photographs ironically argue for photography as a kind of dead end. If one pervasive ambition of contemporary photography is the artful re-declaration of a medium's inherent problems, or the invariable reality that photography is still a medium in flux, Hubbs is impervious. Her work argues quite sincerely for the inexhaustibility of such subjects, and by proxy, for the often forgotten fundamentals of a medium and its simultaneous capacity to speak both of surface and of substance.

The uncertainty and mystery in *Persistent and Falling*, and the artist's practice more broadly, evoke the films of Michelangelo Antonioni and Alfred Hitchcock. Hubbs unapologetically employs the art historical trope of the nude, evoking the practice of photographer Edward Weston whose work is also mirrored here in print quality. The crudeness of the backdrop suggests the photograph is a kind of poor man's *tableau vivant*, eliciting other photographic references: Claude Cahun, Francesca Woodman, and vernacular photography are among them. Finally, the faceless woman may appear as an unmistakable art historical reference—she resembles countless reclining nudes but also specifically recalls the pathos, pose, and perspective of Andrew Wyeth's *Christina's World*, 1948, a Realist painting that depicts a paralyzed woman from behind as she attempts to crawl across a field.

The aforementioned forgotten fundamentals of photography—framing, composition, use of light and shadow—have been employed here to great effect, reducing the three-dimensional world into this two-dimensional picture. A light seems to emanate from beneath the subject, confusing our spatial understanding of the photograph and heightening the theatricality of the image. The curious source of light that illuminates the woman's body, and the disorienting shadow that results, suggest that this woman is not reclining but ungrounded, in flight and suspended by photographic record. The drama is magnified by the artist's work in the darkroom; the gelatin silver print furnishes a richer black than we are accustomed to seeing in most contemporary photographic prints. The exaggerated shadow appears as a kind of void beneath her falling body. Considered as a whole, the composition is a surreal *tableau*, and must be reconciled independently of the subject and surfaces responsible for its manufacture.

Taken as its own form, partially obscured by the white flesh of the falling woman, the shadow resembles an archetypal silhouette of

a seated, slumped man with clenched fist. Upon identifying him, the photograph no longer exists as a conspicuous reference to an art history full of reclining, nude, anonymous women. Nor is it merely a meticulously printed photograph. Instead we find it is a photograph that describes a woman reaching beyond the specter of her own shadow, her index finger scraping at the precarious surface beneath her. In spite of her stasis within the fixed image, one might imagine her continuing to fall—beyond shadow, photographic frame, and the very facade she so delicately tries to dismantle.

We might ask ourselves if this is a photograph about loss or desire. The picture would suggest that they are two sides of the same coin.

—Mark McKnight

Whitney Hubbs (born in 1977 in Los Angeles, CA) is a Los Angeles-based artist. M+B Gallery in Los Angeles mounted a solo exhibition of her work in 2013. Her work has also been featured in group exhibitions at Roberts and Tilton, Los Angeles; Anat Ebgi Gallery, Los Angeles; Higher Pictures, New York; Griffin Editions, New York; Yancey Richardson Gallery, New York; and Galerie Xippas, Paris, among elsewhere. She is the recipient of the Art Council Scholarship, 2008-09, and the Tobey Lewis Award, 2009. Her works are held in the collections of the Whitney Library, New York; The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles; and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. She earned her MFA at the University of California, Los Angeles in 2008, and her BFA at the California College of the Arts, Oakland in 2004. *Flash: Whitney Hubbs* is the first solo museum presentation of her work.

Mark McKnight (born in 1984 in Valencia, CA) is an artist based in Los Angeles. His work has been exhibited and published throughout the United States and in Europe. Most recently, he was among 20 artists nominated for inclusion in the photography biennial *20/20vision*, Christophe Guye Galerie, Zurich, 2015, alongside which an accompanying publication was produced. His work has been featured in solo exhibitions at the Sweeney Art Gallery, Riverside, 2015; and Strongroom, Los Angeles, 2015, and included in group shows at M+B, Los Angeles, 2015; Charlie James Gallery, Los Angeles, 2013; Riverside Art Museum, 2013; Roberts&Tilton, Los Angeles, 2010; San Francisco Arts Commission, 2009; and as part of the New York Photo Festival, 2008, among elsewhere. This fall his work will be included in *The Surface of Color*, The Pit, Glendale. In 2009 he traveled to Finland on a Fulbright Scholarship. He earned his BFA at the San Francisco Art Institute in 2007, and his MFA at UCR in 2015.

Flash! contemporary art series features single works made within the last year. The series is organized by Joanna Szupinska-Myers, CMP Curator of Exhibitions, at the California Museum of Photography at UCR ARTSblock. *FLASH: Whitney Hubbs* is the tenth exhibition in the series. Support for this presentation has been provided by M+B Gallery, Los Angeles.