



Lynn Goldsmith: IN THE LOOKING GLASS

by Alethea Mock

It's a classic scene, really: a woman wandering the streets at dusk looking closely at the shop window displays: miniature worlds, some glamorous, some magical, some bizarre, some sexy. Each quietly offering the promise a new self if you just wear these clothes, have this jewelry, come in and buy yourself *a new you*. We have all probably spent some time looking at window displays, whether out of an interest in goods shown, the aesthetics of the display, or perhaps just out of simple, passing curiosity. On certain nights in New York City you could find Lynn Goldsmith doing

just this, camera in hand, ladder, tripods, sandbags, backdrops and dedicated assistant all in tow. She, however, is not just looking but examining, dissecting, creating and beginning to tell a story in which she will shortly appear.

After more than thirty years working as a commercial photographer specializing in celebrity portraits, Goldsmith began to feel that she was a part of "the masquerade and falsehood of the photographic process," in which the focus was "the

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surface not the soul, where the subjects are objects, decorative, symbolic objects.” The celebrities became a form of advertising, “the selling of a star” as she puts it, rather than a revealing of that person’s deeper self. In the beginning, it was a challenge to her to work with her clients to “make someone look so that it represented their music, or their film, or how others wanted to see them.” Through the process she learned a great deal, not only concerning her craft and the “power of fashion” along with hair and make-up to transform a person, but also about how an identity is constructed.

It was her interest in how we create this concept of a fixed self that led her up a ladder in front of store windows to create her series *In the Looking Glass*. In this work Goldsmith uses the artificial environment as a seed for a narrative that she then brings forth. Deleting portions of the original display, adding new details, and most importantly transposing her own visage into the mannequin(s) in the scene, she creates a tableau that mixes the real and imaginary worlds into one that is both and neither. Occasionally, she will go so far as to don a costume and insert herself into the scene as an entirely new presence. Thus images that began as documents of an external world have transformed into montages of the imagination. Along the way, she blurs not only genres but also the bounds of reality for in her finished images we find half-living beings: mannequins on the edge of humanity, a human face living on a rigid, plastic body, Galatea about to take her first breath.

By placing herself into each scene, Goldsmith is able to upturn expected notions about reality as well as to raise questions about how much the apparent identity of an image departs from the actual identity of the person shown. It is her desire that her work act as a catalyst or a “pattern interrupt” for each viewer. She wants to jolt a person’s mind out of everyday assumptions, encouraging them to ask how much of what we normally assume about others is real, how much is imagined, what is the real self if not these external constructs?

The resulting images feel, at first glance, deceptively familiar. Many of the scenes still closely mimic advertising displays they were

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originally based upon but have a heightened surrealistic quality. Others echo familiar fairytales and myths. They possess the unsettling strangeness of the ordinary subtly transformed into a new unknown quantity. The “characters,” as Goldsmith refers to her fictitious selves, hover in a liminal space between the animate and in the inanimate, between subject and object.

“By removing objects from the windows and adding new elements with additional photographs, I aim to highlight the psychological relationship between what we see and what we imagine,” she said. “I then place myself into the smooth skin and ultimately vacant world of the mannequin. Using my face as a stage where I can offer different looks undermines any attempt to fix my image.”

Meanwhile, the photographer illusively inhabits each character shown, switching between genders, classes, subcultures, ethnicity, and most any other boundary of the self typically thought of as rigid. Her work is not easily defined. Rather than offering simplistic conclusions about the complex nature of self, Goldsmith plays with the possibili-

ties of who she can be. As she describes it, “I want my work to help enlighten me. I’m interested in multiple meanings and a kind of ambiguity that frustrates any attempt to pin it down... I wanted to take what I had learned in my career to show how we are made up of multiple selves. We can see ourselves in terms of how culture has defined and determine us or we are free to make of ourselves as we will!” CA

Technical Notes: Goldsmith begins by shooting the store windows with a Mamiya 645 AFTD fitted with a Valeo 22 WiFi digital back. Her lens outfit includes an 80mm, 120mm macro, 35mm macro, and a 55 to 110mm zoom. While on the street she also uses a very tall Bogen tripod, an 8-foot ladder, sandbags, and a black backdrop. For additional imagery, which she incorporates into her montages, she uses a variety of Nikon cameras, ranging from a Coolpix to the D2xs. After finishing one of her tableaus, Goldsmith uses an Epson printer to create her final prints.

The pictures in this article are untitled and copyrighted at the request of the photographer.

*All Goldsmith quotes are taken from an email interview with the author during August of 2006.

Go to www.lynngoldsmith.com for additional information and images.