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Behind the Scenes with Adam Fuss

On September 25, the first major retrospective to feature the work of British-born, New York-based photographer Adam Fuss debuts at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. We presented the artist with images from the exhibition and asked him to discuss his signature themes and his use of daguerreotypes and photograms.



Adam Fuss, *Untitled*, from the series "My Ghost," daguerreotype (11 X 14 in.), 2000.

All images courtesy of Cheim & Read Gallery, New York, and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

A Daguerreotype's Palette

"I'm interested in working with a palette of blues and grays for aesthetic reasons. Blues and grays occur naturally in daguerreotypes, so this was the right medium to use in terms of achieving the colors that I wanted. The blueness in this image (and other images in the 'My Ghost' series) is also part of the story; the blue is not only a very beautiful hue, but blueness also conveys a sadness, a sense of loss. While it is natural to see this image as mournful, there are a lot of ways to possibly 'read' it. I didn't intend for the dead swan to be viewed as a classical symbol, however. This isn't an allusion to the myth of Leda and the Swan, nor is it necessarily a reference to Christ's suffering. Some people might think this piece, as well as others from the series, is 'morbid' in a dark Victorian sense, but my work is not at all about morbidity. Yes, I do deal with death, but to me death isn't necessarily morbid or taboo. It's part of life."



Adam Fuss, *Invocation*,
Cibachrome photograph
(40 X 30 in.), 1992.

Conveying Timelessness

“This is an attempt at creating a classic image: just look in any museum or art history book for a Madonna and Child and you’ll understand why I wanted to make images of babies. I placed the baby in a shallow tray of water (in which photographic paper was also placed, below the baby) because water is a metaphor for life and birth itself. It’s a simple, life-size composition (simplicity and depiction of images at their true scale are characteristics of photograms), because I wanted it to be iconic and timeless. It’s so timeless that I still do commissions of babies in this style—but only a few times a year, for very special friends. By the way, the babies aren’t so happy to be photographed in this way. The water, although only a couple of inches deep, is dark and probably a little cold. The blackest areas in the babies’ silhouettes represent where their skin met the tray.”



Adam Fuss, *Untitled*,
Cibachrome photogram
(30 X 40 in.), 1998.

The “Life Force” Theme

“Like the baby, the snake is a basic, traditional metaphor. Most people immediately think of the serpent in Eden. To me, the snake represents raw energy. All this animal wants to do when I try to photograph it is get away and get on with its life. I made the first photogram of a snake in 1986, placing one on a layer of powder that was dusted on a sheet of photographic paper. The snakes sprayed the powder into the air when they moved frantically, creating a purely expressionistic pattern. For the image you see here, I updated the process by laying light-sensitive paper in about two inches of water (similar to what I did with the babies) and captured the snakes slithering through the liquid. This image prompts another reading of what the snake might represent; it could be seen as a sperm, swimming towards an egg. In the snake-in-water images, there’s another layer to the ‘life force’ theme I often work with.”



Adam Fuss, *Untitled*,
from the series "My
Ghost," silver gelatin
photogram [35-3/4 x
30-1/2 in.], 1999.

The Challenge of Simplicity

"Although the woman in this image looks like she is executing an extremely simple, natural pose of grief, I had to direct her very specifically. I set off a flash for literally a second to capture the life-size silhouette against a large sheet of photographic paper. That meant there was no room for a limb or a hair to be out of place. Without the model standing at the most streamlined angle, I'd capture all sorts of weird lumps. I wanted this image to be very stark, represented in a palette of only black and white. So a photogram was the most ideal means of creating it. Yes, I could express what I wanted by using another medium. I could easily have made a video. But I prefer to use tools that I'm familiar with. I've been making photograms for 15 years. It's a totally intimate form, and at this point it's my language."

Adam Fuss,
Untitled, from the
series "My Ghost,"
daguerreotype
(8 x 10 in.), 2000.



A Ghostlike Self-Portrait

"I've always been interested in the strong effect of opaque images, and opacity is actually a physical characteristic of daguerreotypes. This was the first daguerreotype I had ever made, and one of only three self-portraits I've ever created during my career. It's me, but at the same time, it's not me. It's just a shadow, but a very unusual one: I moved—intentionally—while I was making this image, so the shadow is blurred and phantom-like. It literally is 'my ghost.' All of the images from the ongoing 'My Ghost' series are part of a larger narrative...but I never start with a specific image in mind, or with a particular story that I want to tell. The plot unfolds as I make the images, which is a process that to me is cathartic. If I had to say what the story of 'My Ghost' is, I'd say it's about my story...or, should I say, about my fate...which is everyone's fate."

"Adam Fuss" is on view at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, through January 12, 2003. The exhibition then travels to the Kunsthalle Bielefeld, Germany (March 2-May 9, 2003).