

Ted Preuss

Featured Photographer

Studies in Self-Reference: Ted Preuss's "Simple Beauty" Series

The representation of women by male artists has been a staple of modern art throughout its history, of which the entire course of photography has been a part. As with every major visual genre, there have been many approaches to the nude, reflecting a wide array of values and differences among conceptions of the relation of artist and subject. With the onset of contemporary feminism, which challenges the male gaze and interprets it as voyeuristic, an element of doubt has been added to the existing complexity of the genre. Is it even legitimate for a male artist - especially a photographer whose medium simulates perceptual reality - to take as his subjects nude women?

Posing the question raised by feminism is entirely appropriate to begin a critical appreciation of Ted Preuss's photography. Far from being naive about the contemporary culture wars, Preuss is acutely aware of the cultural landscape around him and the mines, traps and pitfalls with which it is littered. He does not undertake the study of the nude lightly, but is guided in his practice by a sophisticated and passionate understanding of his relation to his subjects that translates directly and precisely into his images.

Most generally, studies of the nude can be ranged across a spectrum at one end of which is the classical image that emphasizes formal aesthetic qualities, such as line, shape, proportion and light, and elicits a contemplative attitude; and at the



Refine © Ted Preuss

other end of which is the romantic-erotic image that draws attention to sensuous qualities and incites to its extreme sexual desire. Each approach, when carried beyond a certain limit, subverts the genre - a determined classicism risks transmuting the subject into an abstraction void of feeling, whereas an extravagant romanticism ends in pornography, in which the image is a stimulus to arousal rather than an appeal to vision. Neither the vain attempt to

represent the eternal feminine nor the suspect effort to create a surrogate sex object can pass muster in our post-feminist times, although there is abundant evidence of their persistence. With full awareness of the parameters in which his work will be judged, Preuss undertakes the venture of practicing figurative photography with an attitude that is centered in respect for his subjects and is deepened by admiration of them. At the core of



Classical © Ted Preuss

Preuss's project is the intent to produce images that exist for the sake of his subjects, not only for his personal satisfaction. His passion to preserve and present

the independent integrity of his subjects is the key to the elegant simplicity of Preuss's images, which are unburdened by the imposition of myths and fantasies.

Preuss's images are not portraits - they are studies - yet they radiate the individuality of his subjects through their emotion-laced gestures. His studies blend formal



Bow © Ted Preuss

and sensual qualities, but they do not reside merely in the middle of the conventional spectrum - the women whom he represents exist for themselves, not for the male gaze, although they are undeniably beautiful.

For Preuss, nude photography is not the simple matter of hiring a model, placing her in predetermined poses and taking the pictures that he already has in mind. In the first place, Preuss's subjects are not all professional models, but women from various walks of life - I.T. specialist, artist, medical student, and biologist - whom he knows personally, meets by chance or who ask to be his subjects when they have learned about his distinctive practice from others.

When he engages a subject in a session, Preuss has no idea of what the images that result from it will be. He converses with her in a dialogue that reveals how she would like to be perceived and how he perceives her, and through that give and take a mutual

understanding evolves. Most of all, Preuss is concerned with how his subject feels about herself, because that is what he will seek to communicate in his images through the specifics of gesture and pose.

As the session proceeds in earnest, Preuss and his subject exchange suggestions about possible images negotiate about poses and experiment with shots. Rather than being locked into a clinical situation, the shoot is a form of serious play in which the final product emerges from a process that is satisfying in itself.

Always guided by the aim of evoking his subject's feeling of herself, Preuss often shoots her between formal poses, when her bearing is less studied and she is



Tranquil © Ted Preuss

involved in herself – a "personal moment," as he calls it. His project is best fulfilled in the images that flow from those spontaneous occasions.

Preuss's practice eliminates the possibility of his being an auteur or director; reciprocity and receptivity to chance make Preuss a co-participant in a dynamic relation in which images creatively evolve.

The other half of the photographic process - the technique and especially the printing - is as important to Preuss as his practice of relating to his subjects. Deploying a large-format view camera, which permits him to produce images with formal elegance and sensuous subtlety, Preuss shoots with black-and-white sheet film. After he develops the negatives, Preuss prints his images onto artist paper that he hand coats with a platinum palladium emulsion.

The contact prints are exposed to ultra-violet light, cleared by washing out the ferric oxalate in the emulsion with hydrochloric acid, and finished by cleaning them with water. Through intense experimentation and careful attention to the details of technique, Preuss has achieved control over the platinum/palladium process so that he is able to produce an aesthetic surface that contributes to the realization of his central aim.

Platinum/palladium prints are distinguished by the wide range, precise differentiation, and nuance and subtlety of their tonality, all of which permit Preuss to bring forth the individuality of his subjects. Shot in his home studio, occasionally with natural light, preferably on a sultry partly-cloudy day, Preuss's images are bathed in an amber glow that simultaneously beautifies his subjects and places them at a distance from the viewer,



Pure © Ted Preuss

emphasizing their autonomy and self-reference. Precise, yet soft, Preuss's studies are at the opposite pole from graphic art; they are meditative rather than obtrusive and aggressive, reflecting his respectful disposition

Platinum/palladium prints are also lasting, which fulfills Preuss's desire to ennoble his subjects and lift them out of the transience of prevailing commercial imagery. He gives each of his subjects a set of prints that she can pass down to future generations as a vibrant memory of her distinctive beauty and grace.



Morning Light © Ted Preuss

A well-crafted platinum/palladium print will always be seductive by virtue of its complex tonality; yet a beguiling aesthetic surface does not guarantee an arresting image that draws viewers to dwell within it at length. The purely visual dimension of a photograph depends for its impact on composition - the arrangement of line and shape reinforced by the play of light.

Preuss mines his prior experience as an architectural photographer to create tight compositions that are infused with a sense of vitality and vibrancy that comes from his passion for dance. Preuss endows his subjects with the grace of dancers; their poses are precisely configured, yet they are flowing, an effect that results from the way that Preuss integrates straight and curved lines to mold shapes that blend architecturally inspired geometry with the choreography of modern dance. The sense that we are witnessing moments of meditative dance is heightened by Preuss's careful attention to light and shadow, which add nuance and a subtle layered effect to his primary forms.

Although the overall sensibility generated by Preuss's photographic aesthetic is simple elegance, the simplicity is achieved by a synthesis of all of the dimensions of his medium, each one of which he carries to a point of high complexity. Tone, line, shape and light are of equal importance to him; Preuss's images evince his balanced appreciation of and concern and respect for the full range of photography's possibilities.

Once we have understood Preuss's practice, technique and aesthetic, it remains to consider the meaning that is visually conveyed by his images. Neither mastery of technique nor aesthetic sensitivity is enough to motivate Preuss to devote himself to photography. He would demand that we judge whether or not he has fulfilled his aim of capturing his subjects' relation to themselves.

Although we can never be sure that Preuss has grasped an inward state in its outward form, his subjects evince distinct and individualized modalities of self-



Willow © Ted Preuss

reference. The images that make up his series can be divided according to three kinds of self-reference, each of which is specified in particular images by unique emotional tones.



Exquisite © Ted Preuss

Closest to the tradition of nude photography are Preuss's classically composed statuesque images, in which his subjects radiate poise, control and self-possession. A woman in a flowing, fine-spun gown stands in a stately pose with her hands resting on her chest and her head cast slightly downward so that her face betrays a stoical peace.

At the opposite pole from self-possession is self-enclosure, which Preuss communicates in images in which his subjects are folded in upon themselves. A woman sits on a billowy black blanket with her hands grasping her ankle and her head buried in her thighs; her pose recalls a yoga position, but she seems to have

assumed it spontaneously so that she could be lost inside herself. The most distinctive and unique of Preuss's images lie between self-possession and self-enclosure. Here the subjects are photographed from behind, fixing their hair; they are self-absorbed. A woman sits, bending slightly to the left as she extends one arm above her head and crooks the other so that her hands touch her flowing hair and cooperate in straightening it.



Precious © Ted Preuss

Neither impersonally abstract nor sexually inciting, Preuss's images represent his subjects in moments of their own integrity; we are invited to appreciate them and to affirm them as they affirm themselves, but we are not moved to disturb them.

-Michael Weinstein

When we look into Preuss's studies, we understand that he has accomplished his goal. His subjects exist in their own right, for themselves. Most importantly, his images can equally attract the male and female gaze - and for the same reason; they express personal responses, not gendered conventions.

"With this series, I aimed to capture the elegance and grace of the female spirit. To share in their natural beauty and mystery of being, yet, secretly wishing to leave traces of their identity forever"

Flow © Ted Preuss

