Glamorama
Herb Ritts at the Cincinnati Art Museum +
Edward Steichen at the Taft Museum of Art

Herb Ritts’ show at the Cincinnati Art Museum — “L.A. Style” — has an ethereal in-
stone, funeral quality fused with a kindly soullessness. Ritts is one of those seminal photog-
raphers of an age, like Richard Avedon, Irving Penn and Edward Steichen (more on him a little later),
whose lens captured the essence of a zeitgeist way beyond what is framed in his pictures.

Looking at those ceramic hard, luminous black-
and-white supermodel bodies, their sleek gowns
and vacant gazes set within stark black wonder-
lands and concrete edifices, I felt drawn back into
an era when fashions were not to pass the need to
thrive. AIDS was still muddying its way through a
generation, and contemporary art was becoming
out of essential culture in the face of Van’s Fair
spreads, Madonna-era sudadero chic, and
perfume and fashion ads so elegant they make you
believe that perfume, fashion and celebrity could
come in the way the world works.

Ritts, whose exhibition runs at the CAM through
Dec. 50 a protest, not because he had anything
new to add to the conversation, but because, like
Andy Warhol (even if that means Chelsea Hotel
already there, right in front of you, fetishizing and
romanticizing bodies into objects of conspicuous con-
tumption, while maintaining the distance and dis-
cipline of an aesthetic. In the pictures in the exhibit,
beautifully and archly curated by Paul Martineau of
the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles, Ritts makes
poetry out of pop, freezes-drying the quickness of
desire into concrete, black-and-white tokens of
what beauty does when it’s left all alone.

Ritts, intentional foundness homest all of Ritts’
pictures, giving them a ghostly hue that’s so con-
lacquered it turns to glass. One of the most haunting
and potent pieces is “Mark, Hollywood, 1980,”
a photo of supermodel Helene Christensen in which
her hair has been shibbaddled over her face — a
sort of slick primitive essence of glamour, and yet so
glamorous it’s spooky.

That same spookiness is in “Fred will tires,”
a brooch, a sign to “the working man” that
also has the glossy, stained chic of old-fashioned
porn. Still, within these limits, Ritts is able to
find a crystallization and somehow corporeal lucidity. His
eye always seems eager to freeze what’s in the less so
that it looks absolutely prefabricated and “perfect.”

All the pictures are like this in the show:
surface-oriented, a little crude, but also
classical and suave, as if Ritts’ vision
both flourishes and shapes the idea of desire while creating
opacity that seems to
have transcended the era in which it
was created. Also
included in “L.A. Style” are some of
the music videos Ritts
created during his
short lifetime (he died
from AIDS in 1992,
the age of 50). One
of the greatest music
videos ever made has to be his “Love Will Never
Do Without You,” a 1989 gem with Janet Jackson
transformed into a dreamy, robotic supermodel
with the tallest stomach ever to fit into wor-
out jeans.

In the video she is enrobed in beautiful
male bodies and desert-specters. Its nudity
in black and white, and has that glamorous
distance that’s in all of Ritts’ work. Somehow,
though, Jackson seems to be able to inhabit
Ritts’ hyper-cool world with a warmth and
humanity that almost sustains Ritts’
visual motifs. She is a Barbie doll that understands her
Barbie doll ness.