

By Keith Banner

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 etched-in-stone, funereal quality fused with a kinky soullessness. Ritts is one of those seminal photographers 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, luscious black-and-white supermodel bodies, their sleek gowns and vacant gazes set within stark beach wonderlands and concrete edifices, I felt drawn back into an era when Reagan was about to pass the torch to Bush, AIDS was still mauling its way through a generation, and contemporary art was becoming sort of unessential culturally in the face of Vanity Fair spreads, Madonna-era sadomasochism chic, and perfume and fashion ads so elegant they made you believe that perfume, fashion and celebrity could change the way the world works.

Ritts, whose exhibit runs at the CAM through Dec. 30, was a genius, not because he had anything new to add to the conversation, but because, like Andy Warhol (sans all that messy Chelsea Hotel psy-

already there, right in front of you, fetishizing and iconizing bodies into objects of conspicuous consumption, while maintaining the distance and discipline of an aesthete. 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, freeze-drying the juiciness of desire into concrete, black-and-white totems of what beauty does when it's left all alone.

Stark, intentional loneliness haunts all of Ritts' pictures, giving them a ghostly haze that's so calculated it turns into glaze. One of the most haunting and pretentious pieces is "Mask, Hollywood, 1989," a photo of supermodel Helena Christensen in which her hair has been shellacked over her face — a sort of slick primitive overhaul of glamour, and yet so glamorous it's spooky.

That same spookiness is in "Fred with Tires," a homoerotic paean to "the working man" that also has the glossy, stained chic of old-fashioned porn. Still, within those limits, Ritts is able to find a crystallized and somehow corporate lyricism. His eye always seems eager to freeze what's in the lens so that it looks absolutely prefabricated and "perfect."

All the pictures are like this in the show: surface-oriented, a little trashy, but also classical and staid, as if Ritts' vision both flattens and cheapens the idea of desire while creating opulence 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 2002, at 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 tightest stomach ever to fit into worn-out jeans.

In the video she is ensconced in beautiful male bodies and desert-scapes. It's mostly 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 genuineness that almost satirizes Ritts' visual motifs. She is a Barbie doll that understands her Barbie-doll-ness.



◀ Edward Steichen, "Gloria Swanson." Gelatin silver print, 1924. The Museum of Modern Art, gift of the photographer.

Herb Ritts "Versace, Veiled Dress, El Mirage." Gelatin silver print, 1990. The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, gift of Herb Ritts Foundation. ▼

