

POSTCARDS FROM MT. OLYMPUS.

October 22nd, 2012 | Published in " , October 2012

"Controlled Chaos" Tyler Shields at Miller Gallery:

October 12 – October 26, 2012

by Regan Brown

"To be a performance artist, you have to hate theatre. Theatre is fake: there is a black box, you pay for a ticket, and you sit in the dark and see somebody playing somebody else's life. The knife is not real, the blood is not real, and the emotions are not real. Performance is just the opposite: the knife is real, the blood is real, and the emotions are real. It's a very different concept. It's about true reality."

— Marina Abramovic

"Mrs. Eastwood & Co. is a 10 episode reality show that focuses on Clint Eastwood's wife Dina Eastwood, her daughter Morgan, the South African boy-band Overtone whom Dina relocated to the States to give them a chance to break into the American market, and Dina's step-daughter Francesca Eastwood who is dating celebrity photographer Tyler Shields." — per E! Network

REALITY is a very slippery slope, one that ultimately makes landfall for most on the flat-line of pain, disease, blood, feces, decrepitude, death...the Abject. These unwelcome crags can really shiver the timbers of even the most ambitious forces that human nature embodies. Landfall might just even be rockiest for those lured by the Hollywood Siren Song, the chosen few to be borne up high in the eye of Hurricane Multimedia only to be subsequently flung far and low from the All Seeing Lens, all black and blue with something that ain't just 3DHDFX makeup to be sponged off; even then, only do an even smaller number ever really realize that there's no amount of death defying plastic surgery that can reverse such a Flaming and Icarian Fall from Fame or the even deeper gravitas it seemingly mimics: that of being born astride an open grave [1]. I can only imagine many a future former star or starlet you've maybe yet to hear of clutching some old retrofitted iPad to their gaze while lovingly reflecting on their own treasured and youthfully transgressive digitally permacolored portraits as their stem-celled selves fade by half lives into a graying static feedback loop, all the while paparazzi swarming outside dirty motel curtains trying to get a peak past the police lines for the front page tabloid money shot of an "OD'd Dorian Gray, Without Makeup!" Dorian Who!?

It's possible that many of those treasured portraits of staged youthful transgressions such future Immortals will be clutching might well have been snapped by Tyler Shields: celebrity photographer or photographer of celebrities...(?!). That is the question. Hundred Grand Birkin Bags* set aflame by his girlfriend, Clint Eastwood's daughter Francesca; Lindsay Lohan dyed blonde, ala Marilyn, crouching in a flowing dress dead center of a car tunnel, headlights ominously looming at the distant arched opening; the rear end of a Ferrari with a "1%" vanity plate ready to back over an "Occupy This" scribbled on the pavement in cocaine/ sand (?); some billionaire heiress standing with spiky-spiked heels on a million worth pile of British fifty-pound notes; hot chicks in lingerie (whom I personally don't recognize) about to lock lips in some nondescript room, one grasping an axe that rests in a pile of errant drywall. This is a collection of mostly A-list wannabees doing mildly transgressive stuff in order to parlay controversy into even more notoriety, a kind of smattering of snap-shotted scandalous stepping stones, or edgy Abercrombie and Fitch Ads occasionally mixed with an almost sophomoric Maxim S&M fantasy aesthetic: i.e. a lingeried and handcuffed girl mid-sink to the bottom of a pool...a girl with a red hot lip-sticked "Mouthful" of diamond cum glitter cum... etc...etc.

These photos are mostly known entities because the people doing scandalous things in them are known entities, and in this way it's a pretty simple 1 to 1 correlation, even a "famous for being famous" feedback loop, but one not every social climber cum artist can pull off, and to a large degree, do it mostly outside the Fashion Rag shuffle. This work is therefore an interesting nipple twist on the usual cultural entrepreneurial formulation (scandal + glamour + fame = money) because it musses up the stars' hair a bit with dangerous weapons, dirt or maybe even some (real?) blood and then turns around and tries to frame it as Fine Art. Yes, there are certainly a few flashes of something more brilliant in Shields' photos than just cheap glitter: an ability to create iconic images (See Figures Below) among all the "Controlled Chaos" I'm sure the pressure cooker of trying to become a Superstar and trying to hold onto your perfect figure at the same time can be; but I'm left thinking: why should I care about these people the Great Allmedia tells me I should care about, except to envy that they're rich or beautiful or almost famous and I'm not; or just on the visceral level of maybe worrying that they're sometimes in occasional danger(?) And shouldn't they care that I care about them, beyond an envy that's veering sometimes into empathy, since this Cult of Personality is their life's blood? Although in consummate Hollywood style, the blood we see in most of these photos is most likely fake, possibly the emotions too, maybe even the expensive handbags for that matter...maybe this is the point...

*"On a recent episode of Clint Eastwood's family reality show, his daughter Francesca supposedly burned a \$100k Hermes Birkin bag, but a Hermes expert tells RadarOnline.com exclusively that the bag appears to be a fake, and while still rather pricey, would actually retail for far less than the real deal."

— Jen Heger – Radar Online

"I love Los Angeles. I love Hollywood. They're beautiful. Everybody's plastic, but I love plastic. I want to be plastic." —Andy Warhol

"It is this kind of space, this unnatural distance from other things and people, this fame, that for many subsequent artists has become the measure of success. In the wake of Warhol, removal from the world has become the art's reward (...) the mythic idea of the artist as an heroic individual had matured into the idea of artist as a celebrity." —Paul Taylor, from Introduction to "Post-Pop Art" MIT Press, 1989

Warhol, Ritts, & Mapplethorpe(?)

Shields is often emphasizing the physical danger and grunge his work brings to himself and the apparently otherwise coddled Celebrity Class of Hollywood. This does give his photography a level of something that is almost heroically rewarding compared to your average glamour shot...but what exactly? This "Dirty Side of Glamour", (his working title for a soon to be published coffee table book), this "danger" maybe gives a taste, almost a swallow of the "real world" to the otherwise over-groomed: that hint of pain or fear that gives you a rush: a little bondage, a touch of spanking, a Fifty shades of Dorian Gray (?) Although there are notable exceptions in Shields' work we'll get to later, none of this "danger" or controversy or even the human sculptural plasticity and performance inherent in his photos gets near touching the "third rail" of the Cincinnati Art Scene: Robert Mapplethorpe, whose dark angel lurks ominously over this Debut Fotofocus Biennial, maybe because of its glaring absence. I feel it's necessary to take just an imperfect moment to deal with this big naked elephant in the room and a couple of Mapplethorpe's almost contemporaries, whom otherwise are well represented in Fotofocus, to quickly contextualize Shields' relatively digestible form of scandal in the broader Glamour Focus of this city-wide Foto exhibition that has mostly locked the closet and thrown away the key on its Greatest Art Controversy.

"The bourgeoisie apparatus of production and publication is capable of assimilating, indeed of propagating, an astonishing amount of revolutionary themes without ever seriously putting into question its own continued existence or that of the class which owns it." Walter Benjamin, "The Author as Producer" in "Understanding Brecht", trans. Anna Bostock (London New Left Books, 1973) p.94.

If the above is true, then where in the world is Robert Mapplethorpe in FotoFocus? Rather than having been aired out and assimilated, the whole thing just seems to be left festering on the underbelly of the flying pig. I'm guessing most don't have to be reacquainted with the circumstances of then Director Dennis Barrie's 1990 arrest and trial of he and the CAC over the X portfolio of S&M homoerotica and the two photos of underage children at the center of the storm which engulfed "Robert Mapplethorpe: A Perfect Moment" and all who surrounded it. "It" even sparked a made for cable Showtime film in 2000 [2] and a 20th anniversary symposium...at the ICA in Philadelphia [3]. Wouldn't such a symposium be cathartic here? Or even a new retrospective planned for the 30-year anniversary in 2020 at the CAC, just so that Mark Twain's old adage about Cincinnati holds true....

At the present spotlighted CAC show, there is of course a depth in Warhol's distance, an "Instant side of Glamour", so to speak, of his Polaroids and a "Neoclassical Side of Glamour" to the Herb Ritts', (some often compared him unfavorably to Mapplethorpe) show at the CAM, and a "Classic Photography side of Glamour" to Edward Steichen's work at the Taft...BUT after having lived in a few Post-Soviet East European Countries for 12 years, I often find myself ranting at people who see Art as a pretty ornamentation or a sometimes expensive interior design addition when I think the crux of Freedom in Art is a Freedom of Speech issue, not a freedom of glamour issue! (huffing...panting...). People have gone to jail over this stuff. And this is maybe why, strangely enough, of all these Artists mentioned, Shields' show is most compelling, albeit in a somewhat hetero-acceptable, lack of controversial homoerotic content, chauvinist kind of way...at least there's something to get pissed off about there, and many have in online posts, and these seem to play right into Shields' hands in a carefully orchestrated and scandal clad "full of fury signifying nothing" kinda way. Not arguing for freedom of speech for chauvinists here or something, there's plenty of that already, but at least Shields is throwing a little Hollywood Dirt into the otherwise seemingly hermetically sealed environment of the major "White Cubes" presentations on the almost pristine marblesque models and matrons of Stardom, especially when it's all so void of Mapplethorpe's gravitas...although he did do Glamour quite well as well...hmmm (?).

Tyler Shields: "Conflicted Chaos"

"Chaos (Greek χᾰος khaos) refers to the formless or void state preceding the creation of the universe or cosmos in the Greek creation myths." [4]

"Olympus was not shaken by winds nor ever wet with rain, nor did snow fall upon it, but the air is outspread clear and cloudless, and over it hovered a radiant whiteness." —Homer, Odyssey, Book 6, 41

"These photos will last longer than all of us. They will not break down. They will not turn off. The DVD will not unsync. You can buy this, put it on your wall and it will outlive you. And that's pretty awesome."

—Tyler Shields in interview with author at Miller Gallery, 10_10_12.

That is pretty awesome for a guy from the relatively small town of Jacksonville, Florida who never graduated high school, much less studied photography, who ended up in Hollywood living on a pizza a week and posting stuff to his MySpace page and a blog till Lindsay Lohan contacted him for a shoot... and the rest is history. This is not unlike Ritts, whose rise is described thus:

"There they were, actor Richard Gere and Lucite furniture sales rep Herb Ritts, out in the desert waiting at a gas station for a flat tire to be fixed. Ritts, who had just started taking photographs of his friends, picked up his camera and shot three rolls of film. Gere took the film to his publicist, the publicist got it to Mademoiselle, Esquire and American Vogue, and Ritts started getting checks in the mail. Never mind that he never studied photography, was using only natural light and was fooling with a camera with an automatic light meter. A little while later Mademoiselle sent him out to shoot

Brooke Shields, a friend's friend connected him up with Italian Harper's Bazaar, and a star was born." —Barbara Isenberg, The Los Angeles Times, February 11, 1990.

This kind of Horatio Alger happenstance is where the comparison ends though. Ritts' rise seems almost like an OldSkool Testament/ Hand of God Story to the constantly connected and distractible current generation. I mean they're like in the desert literally, like, like, you know what I mean? Instant notoriety has been democratized and everyone's fifteen megabytes of fame is barely a Youtube video plus a mouse-click away. Also, whereas Ritts worked on perfecting the art of photography, specifically fashion photography, Shields has bypassed this niche/ trap for so many of his ilk by just getting the stars to edge toward the rim with him a bit, not exchanging any money per se, but bartering a possibly even greater currency these days in Hollywood: Scandal, and not necessarily that of the grainy green night-vision-sex-video kind, but more of the glossy artsy kind. It seems so much more hygienic. Although Shields has been known to do the occasional video too...and book...oh yeah and apparently now also a film. He seems afflicted by our Multimedia ADHD generations' desire to be a jack of all trades, well just because nearly everyone has nearly every type of recording device/ publishing network at their fingertips. It's like the answer to question of why you climb The Mountain...with your Olympus...because it's there.

This makes Shields an animal of a bit more contemporary stripe because he was to some degree able to bypass the crumbling edifice of the paper magazine industry and do much of this on his own terms, in as much as those terms are determined by the ecosystem of Fame he has sluiced through toward his widely publicized and nearly accomplished goal of making a full length film. Did I mention he's making a full-length film?

This micro-marketing online DIY publicity management in multiple forums (facebook, twitter, blog, website et. al.) is almost more fascinating than his photography and just maybe this is the reason he's so En Vogue for many a struggling up and comer. Shields in particular started out, like so many these days, trying to break into film by making music videos, sort of backed into photography, parlayed that into meeting potential actors for his film and has even made a couple of attempts at "writing", well yes, a film script, but also two in a series of a six planned books (a sextology?), all the while flaunting grammatical errors et al. with the same chutzpa he flaunts the latest scandal buzz: the "Twilight" films make Vampires big: Voila! Lohan in "sexy" bloody fangs. Rhiana gets abused by Chris Brown: Voila! Heather Morris from Glee gets the "bruised up Barbie" treatment, sporting, of all things, a "sexy" black eye!? Outrage! Apology. Lethe. It all just seems so staged, such easy pickings while all the while Shields is insisting that his portrayals of women are "powerful":

"My thing with women is like women are so powerful, their pain threshold is far beyond anything a man has...The fact that they wear those heels, those heels are fucking uncomfortable, their toes are bleeding, they strap themselves into these chains...like wearing a bra everyday, constant pain, and I see power from that." —Tyler Shields in interview with author at Miller Gallery, 10_10_12

I would suggest Shields' most notable work is just because of what I might characterize as this willful "blind spot" evinced above. It lets him have his cake and eat it out to. Really though, the stuff that has any artistic value whatsoever, outside of this hype and scandal express he rides, either strips away the glamour, as in his "candid" shot of Lohan [Fig. 1] or sets glamour up for a dash with at least the pretense of the object: the (fake) blood, the feces the dirt. His most iconic work often doesn't spotlight any particular Hollywood icon but spotlights his own ability to create his own brand of the scantily clad iconic in digital chromogenic print which I wish had been more glossy than matte in the gallery: the woman stuffing herself into the oven to suck down some suicide gas (?) [Fig. 2]; the prone long-legged and high-heeled woman shitting (?) a chromatic spray of paint on the pavement [Fig. 3]; the woman with the Good Witches' Red Wizard of Oz sequined shoes and ankle socks sprayed with a copious amount of blood dripping off her wand [Fig 4]. I swear that wand is bloody from beating us audience members over the head with such a blatant title as "Life is not a Fairytale" which is also scribbled out word for word on the photo's tile floor in piles of glitter spread at the Good Witch's feet: (note to Mr. Shields: although you never do use the software, let me just suggest you Photoshop that glitter title out...and others like it...your work would say so much more if you did. Remember that old Hollywood adage: show don't tell). If you take Shields' word for it, all of the women he shoots seem to be (unfortunately) consensual partners in this enterprise, (if you pretty much discount most of the broader societal pressures of being a sex object) unlike, apparently, a photographer he often gets compared to, Terry Richardson, et al. [5] Yet as one comment in the forums that exploded online, some with even some death threats for Shields, during the whole Heather Morris black-eye brouhaha suggested, "Why shouldn't she have to apologize as well?" as Shields had. If some women with such a powerful media prescience are consensual and complicit in objectifying themselves, there's little even the staunchest critical thinking or feminism can do in the face of such a beaming set of mothlights pointed straight at the young human mind.

In my conversation with Shields, I felt he was well aware of the centrifugal force of the powerful attractors he was uploading to the Multimedia Maelstrom. It's a formula as old as the hills, or as old as Mt. Olympus in this case: the gods on high are above and beyond you, the human maul of unwashed masses, and their transgressions and immortal imprint on this otherwise transitory life, well, some would have you believe we all secretly long for all of it... Shields, mostly because of his accessibility both online and in person seems more like a genial psychopomp than a blatant celebrity flaunter of social mores, one who is more of a mediator between a pretty cliché ridden unconscious and conscious realm that marketing has near completely colonized at this point. In this sense, I felt like I already knew him when I talked to him, and in a way, because of his vast web presence, (video, blogs, interviews, images etc. etc.), I sort of do as much or more than in fact many of my friends and acquaintances. Maybe this lack of a distanced mystique or any sense of privacy seems appealingly honest nowadays, but it also draws one into an orbit of flip interpretations, wide-eyed and mouthed star gazers with the almost willful adolescent Schadenfreude of a set of train wreck gawkers, the ranters and ambulance chasers of life, magnified a thousand times by the internet, those who in our increasingly virtualized world sometimes don't quite discern where mortality begins and fantasy ends.





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[1] Becket, Samuel, http://quotes.dictionary.com/they_give_birth_astride_of_a_grave_the
"They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more." Samuel Beckett (1906–1989), Irish dramatist, novelist. Pozzo, in Waiting for Godot, p. 57a, Grove Press (1954).

[2] Manheim, Michael (Producer), Pierson, Frank (Director) (2000), "Dirty Pictures" [Motion Picture]. USA: MGM Television.

[3] "Imperfect Moments" Mapplethorpe and Censorship Twenty Years Later". Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, February 12-13, 2009
<http://www.icaphila.org/events/mapplethorpe.php>

[4] Chaos (cosmogony) [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chaos_\(cosmogony\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chaos_(cosmogony))

[5] "Tyler Shields Exposed": <http://tylershieldsexposed.tumblr.com/> (2/22/2012)

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