

## The Extimate Gaze

Deanna Fong

The large-format photograph depicts a young woman in black. Her arms are folded into herself, as if reinforcing the collapsing structure of her own body. Her gaze falls softly somewhere outside the photograph's frame. Her left hand rests on the dark, polished surface of an antique mirror, which yields no reflection—only texture, grain, particles of light. There is a hyperreal focus on the subject's hands and face; a shallow depth-of-field makes the periphery blur, such that the image reports a kind of visual convexity. The emphasis on the subject's hands and the distorted background evoke Parmigianino's 16th-century *Self-portrait in a Convex Mirror*; however, the photographer, unlike the painter, does not make self-contained worlds through artistic representation. Rather, he interrogates whether intersubjectivity and self-knowledge are even possible, given the volatility of being at the subject's core.

Learoyd's room-sized camera obscura produces one-off positive images directly on photosensitive Ilfachrome paper, such that there is no negative or transparency. Each photograph is a unique print. Because this technique resists mechanical reproduction (images, where reproduced, are high-resolution photographs of the originals), it is tempting to ascribe an aura of authenticity to the images, as direct indexes of a non-returning time and place. However, precisely because there is no mediating step between exposure and print, Learoyd's photographs are, in fact, laterally reversed: what we see is not a replica of the live scene, but rather its mirror image. For Jacques Lacan, the mirror is the extimate site *par excellence*, where the interior self is projected as exterior, as other, as illusory whole. This coherent self-image, however, is always thwarted by what it leaves out—in this case, the impossible act of seeing ourselves as *ourselves*, without the mediation and distortion of fantasy. This extimacy is the pleasure—and frustration—of Learoyd's photography, especially in encountering it at one-to-one scale in the space of the gallery. His carefully posed subjects, as well as the medium itself, invite us to believe in intimacy and authenticity, to fantasize that we might access the interior psychological landscape of another, or of ourselves. Yet, in gazing at the photograph, we hit a wall: any insight into the photographic subject's thoughts is purely speculative, sounding only the contours of our own desire: What is she looking at? What is she thinking? What does she feel? The mirror—both as thematic content within the photograph and as the correlative photographic process that produces it—resists the idea of unmediated sight and, by figurative proxy, knowledge and mastery. *Olya* suggests that all acts of seeing are lacking, partial, and distorted; like the unreflecting surface of the mirror in the photograph, there is an unyielding kernel at the subject's core—the photographic subject as much as the observing subject—that cannot be read, interpreted, or otherwise possessed.



Richard Learoyd

*Olya Square Mirror*, 2010

camera obscura Ilfochrome photograph, 147.3 x 121.9 cm