

Transparent Plastic

Jaleh Mansoor

An abstracted landscape of textures until a face settles into view, Daido Moriyama's *Tokyo*, 1974, gathers the contradictions in the historicity of the medium. Does it offer depth of view (Louis Daguerre, Gustave Le Gray) or a topography of surfaces (Anna Atkins, Henry Fox Talbot)? Is it an equivalent (Alfred Stieglitz), an index of time (Étienne-Jules Marey), a pregnant moment (Henri Cartier-Bresson)? What is photographic realism? The visual field bound by the frame is shiny and chaotic, a cacophony of represented consistencies, a chaos of grain. When vision settles, a face emerges at the top of a triangular form, which already suggests composition in keeping with the genre of the portrait. But this portrait is barely operative as such, given that the only part of the face not cut off by the frame is a toothy mouth whose expression, gender, or identity is impossible to assign. Clashing codes, then, but on numerous levels: deictic, descriptive, evidentiary, abstract, representational. The dominant quality of the image is this almost blinding quality of shine, which, it turns out, is a garment, an overcoat of sorts. But it is transparent. And it reflects the light from a camera, a kind of perverse medium specificity. The dominant regime of the image is plastic. And plastic becomes a framework for vision itself. There is a formalist history, a history of form, to be written on the marriage of plastic and capitalism in the American Cycle of Accumulation, 1949-1974.

But we get ahead of ourselves. Moriyama's project, by turns commercial and relatively autonomous, began in the barricades of Tokyo, 1968, from which also issued the Provoke collective. Provoke ran three issues of its journal. Moriyama was part of the second and third (10 March and 10 August 1969). The journal understood itself to be a platform for experimental photography and emphasized the aleatory capacities of the mechanical medium, and the texture and grain of "error" in developing the latent image. Provoke published a summation of its project after the journal had ceased in 1970. Barthes' essay "The Third Meaning," in which the material and contingent elements of the medium are emphasized over connotative and denotative signification, was among the literature cited. By 1983 Moriyama was winning national awards.



Daido Moriyama

Tokyo, 1974

gelatin silver print, 40 x 32.8 cm



Al McWilliams

Head (D), 1998

beeswax on gelatin silver print, 38.1 x 30.5 cm