

Image Meets Medium

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Baby, a.k.a. Jean Harlow, née Harlean Harlow Carpenter (1911-1937). With cibachrome, black and white becomes red, yellow, and blue. Baby's got the blues. Photography becomes her celebrity: the process of twentieth-century genre-making where the subject-object problem dissolves from black-and-white glossies into poster repetitions of "the star." The ephemerality of fame solidifies into the image.

The ontology of the photograph insists on a layering of social resonances and temporalities. The title's reference to camp filmmaker Kenneth Anger's censored book *Hollywood/Babylon* (published in English in 1965) recalls the notoriety of the blonde bombshells illustrated there, and their (often) tragic demises. Lasting fame is ensured by the goddess-image on this poster that refuses to dissolve into the pool.

The dialectical image of modernity, simultaneously fixating and alienating. The image fixed by the photo-bath of the cibachrome process; the image distorted by the waves of celebrity-making begun when Baby was only ten. *Hollywood/Babylon* points to where the image meets the surface and the depth of the social subject. What's sadder than the distorted and fragmented face of a "great beauty"? Baby-blues upturned, lips melting: Harlow, Garbo, Dietrich, Monroe. Women immersed in the Hollywood machine.

Hollywood/Babylon makes the reveal, refracting the dearly held cultural ideal of woman as goddess and the idea of the autonomy of the photograph. Image meets medium: old-time movie poster floats in the chlorinated pool, and the original slides taken in 1966 subsequently serve the artist as "tests" for the cibachrome process in 1975. They destroy any illusions we might harbour of celebrity and any nostalgia we might have had for "the unprecedented growth in the production and use of images"¹ that has become our contemporary reality.

¹ André Gunthert, "Photography, Laboratory of a History of Modernity," *Photography: Crisis of History*, ed. Joan Fontcuberta (Barcelona: Actar, n.d.), 235.



Michael Morris
Hollywood/Babylon, 1978
cibachrome print, 31 x 20 cm