

What is your premise?

My first encounter with the work of Jemima Stehli was during a visit to her north-London studio in 2000. I had eagerly accepted her offer to show me her work, which I had no previous knowledge of. Upon entering her studio, I was instantly jarred by the doubling effect that confronted me - hung on the studio's walls were large full-scale photographs depicting the studio and its contents, including the artist herself and the camera that took the image, which also stood in the real space before me. A huge mirror leaning against her studio wall further complicated this strange repetitious setting. Over the next several hours, Jemima led me through her artistic development to when she came to use the studio as the site of production and part of the central image, and position her own nude body as the subject and the object simultaneously.

Among the works we looked at that day were stacks of polaroids that lay strewn on her studio floor. Jemima described to me how when she makes work, she begins with only an idea and a desire to create something. She starts by taking polaroids, which she thinks of as drawings or sketches, as a means to experiment and formulate her ideas. She spends long periods in the studio taking polaroid after polaroid, playing with formal aspects, continually adjusting the composition, lighting and pose until she is satisfied enough to make the final work. What intrigued me about these "sketches" was how vividly they captured the artist's private act of working in her studio. The attempts, failures, and repetitions were all caught on film, as was her pleasure of creating, revealed through her playful and performative gestures. Almost cinematic in their quality, the polaroids demonstrate how both intuitively and meticulously Jemima constructs each final image.

As I consider the two bodies of work brought together in this exhibition, I cannot help but think back to those polaroids and how they may offer insight into understanding the complex nature of Stehli's project of engaging with the performative process of image making as a way to investigate notions of female

subjectivity. In the works presented here, Stehli continues to enact a series of "performances" in which she uses her naked body to challenge notions of desire, narcissism, and sexuality to raise important questions about the degree of control she has over her own image.

In *Standing Nude 1* (2001/2002), the artist creates a full-length nude photograph of herself at the moment of making. Far from creating self-portraiture, Stehli stages an elaborate set-up to explore the highly-coded systems involved in making herself over into the object. As she holds the cable release to take the photograph, she looks into the camera, face to face with the mirror in front of her, and strikes a classical pose. By assuming this traditionally formal stance of the female model in painting, while capturing the conscious moment of creation in the artwork, Stehli employs a strategy of ambiguity in an attempt to affirm her own identity as a female artist and as a subject in the contemporary context. Her direct gaze simultaneously engages the viewer and herself, as the studio becomes a place of creation and also narcissism. The narcissistic desire of seeing a reflection of oneself in the world is what Stehli explains as one of the key motivations for producing a work of art.

Studio Nude (2003) also investigates the subjective moment as it relates to the moment of creativity. Stehli furthers the complex relationship between viewer, artist and model that is apparent in all of her work by positioning the camera as the primary focus while she herself assumes what appears to be a more passive, horizontal position. "In this image, I am not caught up with looking at my own reflection," Stehli explains, "I am facing back into the studio, contemplating the act of making. And the viewer is more aware of the camera being focused on them." ⁱ At once highly-constructed and random, the work challenges our expectations of model and subject, and exposes the tensions that place Stehli's images somewhere between performance and object, still-life and action painting.

In my conversations with Jemima, she spoke of how she had been thinking about Bert Stern's "The Last Complete Sitting," a series of photographs Stern took of Marilyn Monroe shortly before her death. Jemima had been particularly struck by a question Monroe had apparently posed to the photographer during one of the sessions: "She picked up her champagne glass, took another sip and said, 'What's your premise?'"ⁱⁱ

In her *mm* (2002) series, Stehli takes the idea of photograph as painting one step further and captures a level of performativity only seen previously in her polaroid sketches. Loosely inspired by Stern's images of Marilyn, Stehli repeatedly drops a red scarf to obscure and reveal her naked body while using mirrors to create images of varying degrees of abstraction. Like Marilyn, Stehli is keenly aware of the powerful act of image making, and conveys this awareness in all aspects of production. Here, Stehli disregards the conventions of colour and tonal consistency usually employed when printing a photographic series. Her manipulation of hue at the printing stage brings issues of control to even the formal level. The original inspiration for these painterly images gets left far behind as Stehli plays with the limits of abstraction, allowing few references to the outside world. By creating images that are more autonomous, Stehli seems to recall those earlier polaroids in which the process of making is the meaning.

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i Conversation with the artist, March 12, 2003.

ii Stern, Bert. *The Complete Last Sitting*. Schirmer Art Books (Mosel/Munich) 1992.

Illustrations



mm 4, 2003 (above)

Standing Nude 1, 2001/2002 (verso)

Works in the Exhibition

mm 1, 2003

C-print on aluminum in wooden tray frame
124 x 151 cm
edition of 3

mm 2, 2003

C-print on aluminum in wooden tray frame
124 x 151 cm
edition of 3

mm 3, 2003

C-print on aluminum in wooden tray frame
124 x 151 cm
edition of 3

mm 4, 2003

C-print on aluminum in wooden tray frame
124 x 151 cm
edition of 3

mm 5, 2003

C-print on aluminum in wooden tray frame
124 x 151 cm
edition of 3

Standing Nude 1, 2001/2002

C-print on aluminum in wooden frame
238 x 188 cm
edition of 3

Studio Nude, 2003

C-print on aluminum in wooden frame
238 x 188 cm
edition of 3

All works, courtesy of Lisson Gallery, London

Biography

Born in 1961, Jemima Stehli lives and works in London. She has had solo exhibitions at ARTRA, Milan (2001); Chisenhale Gallery (2000); Artlab, Imperial College, London (2000). Group exhibitions include: 'Hilary Lloyd, Jemima Stehli, Brian Dawn Chalkley,' City Racing London (1998); 'A Shot in the Head,' Lisson Gallery, London (2000); 'City Racing 1988-1998: a partial account,' I.C.A. London, (2001); 'Gymnasium,' Palais Thurm and Taxis, Bregenz, Austria (2001); 'Face Off,' Kettle's Yard, Cambridge (2002); 'Body Politics,' Elga Wimmer Gallery, New York, NY (2003). Stehli's work will also be featured in an upcoming solo exhibition at the Jeffrey Charles Gallery, London. Recently published by ARTicle Press, a monograph *Jemima Stehli*. She is represented by Lisson Gallery in London.