

## *The Intimacy of Common Experience*

Jenna Westra's images are questions in visual form, invitations to reflect on the conventions and histories that lie behind our own looking. Her photographs and films direct the gaze in subtle and specific ways but they do not determine our response to what we see: is the erotic charge of a pair of stockings legs latent in the image, or have I brought it with me, the trace of a visual culture that insistently sexualises female bodies? Whose eyes am I looking through?

Questions such as these are posed in the form of gentle tensions running through Westra's work – in performances for the camera that are both choreographed and spontaneous; in moving images that channel the tranquillity of still lives; in photographs that embody the grace and flow of movement. The models in Westra's images are aware of being looked at, but their calm self-possession also suggests a resolve to resist definition by the camera's eye.

Beyond the physical and emotional closeness between her subjects and the photographer herself, there's another kind of shared intimacy that draws the viewer in. It's the intimacy of common experience, and it is linked to the way that Westra's work alludes to, but never quite inhabits, a range of different genres and historical forms. Her work draws on the fascination of the nearly-identifiable, each image constructed around a constellation of possible meanings, waiting to be completed by the viewer.

*Hair Drape*, for instance, alludes in its languor to a certain pre-Raphaelite sensibility. The lock of one woman's hair draped over the shoulder of another evokes an exquisitely subtle tactility, but it is an equally powerful expression of desire, suggesting the more urgent touch of unseen hands outside the frame. It also pays homage to the female muses of early photographers and painters – the latter mostly men, for whom femininity was a mysterious otherworld, and whose work could only show the outward signs of their subject's identity. In Westra's images, this inner world is lived and shared.

In other works, the suggestive forms of fruit gesture simultaneously towards the classical ideals of the still life and the erotic image. A clenched fist squeezes the juice of a cut lemon into an open mouth; a bare foot rolling back and forth over a ripe pineapple has the dreamlike sensuality of a Surrealist film. Bodies and limbs, captured in angular movement and truncated by the frame, resemble close-cropped documents of early performance art.

It might be argued, of course, that the real power of the photograph lies in what it doesn't show. In this respect, a work like *Kayla with Found Slide Projections* functions as a metaphor for the extraordinary intensity of concealment. It also cuts to the conceptual heart of Westra's practice: that the individual subject exists in the shadow of forces beyond the image, and can only be present there in fragments and glances for the viewer to reassemble. Jenna Westra's work reminds us that as spectators, we are never passive.

-Eugenie Shinkle, May 2022