

DENISE PRINCE MARTIN

THINGS I NEVER TOLD YOU



WOMEN & THEIR WORK

MAY 17 - JUNE 23, 2007

AUSTIN, TEXAS

THINGS I NEVER TOLD YOU:
THE PHOTOGRAPHS OF
DENISE PRINCE MARTIN

Doe and doll encounter each other in a landscape of gravel and tile. Their proximity belies an intimacy, as if the two were companions in a fairy tale or bedtime story. She is ready for an outing, donning a cap and buttoned coat, white stockings and buckled shoes. But the setting is all wrong. Save the large flagstones, transported into this courtyard by its landscapers, nothing about this paved landscape supports the interplay between these two characters. Instead, the setting adds to the ambiguity of the scene and what is taking place in it. On closer inspection of the image, one sees that the doll, with legs and arms poised as

if propped up, is a real girl and the doe, with seams that reveal where its plastic parts connect together, is a hunting decoy. Complicating the scene even further, the title of this image is *First Kiss*.

First Kiss is one image in a portfolio of images of women that Denise Prince Martin has constructed in the past five years. Women of all ages, sizes, ethnicities and races are represented in settings as varied – oil refinery, mulchyard, motel parking lot, bingo hall – places with palpable histories. I hesitate to call Prince Martin's photographs portraits (in fact, Prince Martin herself would reject such a categorization) because as portraits they are unstable, shifting too much focus away from the woman herself. Despite always occupying the center of the frame, Prince

Martin's women are one element in a scene carefully constructed for the camera. Often dressed in elaborate costumes, Prince Martin's women share a subtle and sometimes brazen relationship with the objects that surround them and the settings they inhabit. Altogether, character, costume, props and setting suggest narrative, but one that is ambiguous and unresolved within the image itself. Denise Prince Martin's women have stories to tell.

Applying methods from literary theory and Roland Barthes' essay "Rhetoric of the Image" to define how narrative functions in contemporary photography, Lucy Soutter writes, *photography is always and yet never a narrative form: always in that it contains the permanent record of the act of photographing and of any actions that were in progress at the moment of exposure, never in that it remains forever static... Caught in a state of permanent suspense vis a vis events that have just happened or are about to take place, photographs contain essential seeds of narratives that can never come to fruition except in the imagination.*¹

Soutter's discussion provides useful terms for deciphering the codes in Prince Martin's images. By separating the act of photographing from the actions being performed in the photograph – narration from narrative – we can begin to understand the rhetoric of Prince Martin's images and the strategic way in which she "frames" her tales.

A survey of the images included in this exhibition shows that Prince Martin maintains a standard distance between her camera and her subjects. From this distance, she is able to capture an image of the subject's entire figure in their setting. Sometimes this compositional strategy emphasizes the woman's aloneness in the frame, as in the case with *Spring Rite*. The distance between the camera and the woman allows the landscape to envelop her. It is certainly one of the more romantic images in Prince Martin's portfolio as the woman's skirt is carried by the wind as she gazes over her shoulder to



Spring Line, 2006. Color Photograph. 30" x 30".

look at the field of newly sprouted seedlings. Perhaps the crop will provide her with wheat to make a round of bread like the one she holds in the crook of her arm. Her aloneness in the frame gives way to a sense of loneliness and longing, but her sturdy frame also shows resilience in a landscape reminiscent of Wyeth's *Christina's World*. More than variations on a theme, the effect of repeating this formal composition is one that equalizes Prince Martin's subjects amongst each other. Each image is given the same treatment and structure, which allows each image to present its own story.

Though Prince Martin references imagery from a history of representations of woman in art since the Renaissance, Cindy Sherman is the artist to whom Prince Martin is most indebted to conceptually. Where thirty years ago, Sherman used the visual codes of cinema to imply narrative in photography and explore the way in which women are framed in film in her *Untitled (Film Stills)*, Prince Martin employs the visual syntax of editorial fashion and style photography. Seducing through slickness, saturated color, professional styling and art direction, Prince Martin's photographs appeal to commercial sensibilities. But she then disrupts with details, the very ones that fashion photographers airbrush out to create their images of desire, and individual elements fail to coalesce. Rather than creating and marketing desire, images in the series complicate, even usurp, desire by amplifying the contrivances of fashion photography to the level of the absurd.

For instance, what circumstances have led a woman, who appears to be on the lookout for a cab, stranded in the desert in front of a Prada store? Because we are conditioned by fashion photography, we can start to imagine a narrative reinforced by advertising language: She breaks a heel and because she is chic and sophisticated, independent and wealthy, she pops into Prada to buy a new pair of shoes before hailing a cab uptown to meet her friends.² All this would make

(advertising) sense if the scene were set in front of Prada's Soho location, but she is certainly not shoe shopping at *Prada Marfa*, a permanent installation by the artists Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset, who transformed an abandoned gas station between Marfa and Valentine, Texas into a Prada storefront. Prince Martin's *Spring Line* capitalizes on the significance of Elmgreen and Dragset's installation, which offers a wry commentary on the gentrification of the small West Texas town, cultural tourism and fashion's short shelf-life made through luxury branding. Prince Martin suggests that this woman is part of the art cognoscenti, an insider that frequents Marfa and yet who is also an outsider if she expects a cab in the high Chihuahuan desert. All of these scenarios are at play in the image, as Prince Martin's photographs open up more possibilities than they do resolutions.

Cindy Sherman's film stills and feminist film theory, specifically Laura Mulvey's *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, show us the ways in which the film camera positions women as objects of desire and how we as viewers are able to participate in a film's narrative as voyeurs.³ In one aspect of her work, Prince Martin uses photography's narrative potential to elaborate on this conversation, translating it into other realms of visual culture. By using everyday women as models, the artist literalizes fantasies that advertising projects onto and in women and reflects the ways in which we as women code ourselves daily with the hope of looking uncoded, natural. But, within the *Things I Never Told You* series is a subset of images in which the woman stands in the center of the frame, posed, composed and looking back at the camera. In *Preparing for Miss Chanel Lee*, the model's eyes and face reveal that she is uncomfortable, as perhaps most wearing a mini-dress made of bubbles would be, and because she is not a professional model, she is indecisive about her participation in the scene. In *Pink Bazooka, Pop! Rat-A-Tat-Tat*, a pink-camo bikini-clad woman in

roller skates is defiant. She carries a blow-up doll whose head is wrapped in a camo-printed hunting mask, which veils the doll's face, but leaves its hot pink crotch and nipples exposed. A recently popped bubble of hot pink chewing gum freezes the model's mouth into the perfect "O" that mirrors the blow-up doll's covered mouth. She returns the camera's and thus, the viewer's gaze, straight-on. In images like *Bazooka, Pop!* and *Miss Chanel Lee* where the model looks back at us, she assumes agency over her representation and the narrative suggestions reinforced by *mise-en-scène* staging are subverted. Prince Martin shows us a glimpse of the real woman behind the ostentatious costuming, suggestive props and incongruous settings. Narratives collapse under the weight of the woman's gaze and the photograph finds a more stable foothold as a portrait.

Risa Puleo
testsite curator, ...*might be good* editor
Fluent~Collaborative, Austin, Texas

¹ Soutter's essay examines the narrative strategies of a group of photographers – mostly women who photograph women and also mostly graduates of Yale University's MFA program – all of whom participated in the group exhibition *Another Girl, Another Planet* at Greenberg Van Doren Fine Art in 1999. Denise Prince Martin began working on her *Things I Never Told You* series independently of this group of photographers around the same time. Lucy Soutter, "Dial 'P' for Panties: Narrative Photography in the 1990s." *Afterimage*. January 2000.

² See Roland Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image." *Image, Music, Text*. Ed. and trans. Stephen Heath. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), pp. 32-51 for examples, such as these, of the methods for deciphering advertising's codes.

³ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" *Screen* Vol. 16 No. 3 Autumn 1975. pp. 6-18.



Spring Rite, 2006. Color Photograph. 30" x 30".

DENISE PRINCE MARTIN

EDUCATION

- 2007 Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture Residency Program, Skowhegan, New York
 1989-1991 California Institute of the Arts, Valencia, California
 1988-1989 School of Visual Arts, New York, New York

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2007 Women & Their Work, *Things I Never Told You*, Austin, Texas
 Melkweg Galerie, *Women*, Amsterdam
 2004 Plan B, *Women*, Austin, Texas
 2003 ART BAR, *Women*, Dallas, Texas

AWARDS

- 2005 Nominated Leopold Godowsky Jr. Color Photography Awards

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2005-2007 Arthouse at the Jones Center, *New American Talent 20* traveling exhibition, Austin, Texas, Wichita Falls Museum of Art, Wichita Falls, Texas; juror Dan Cameron, Senior Curator at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York
 2006 Albuquerque Museum of Art & History, *Biennial Southwest*, Albuquerque, NM; juror Douglas Fairfield, Curator, Albuquerque Museum of Art & History
 Galleriurbane, *Me, Myself and Everybody Else*, Marfa, Texas
 Dunn & Brown Contemporary, *5x7*, Dallas, Texas
 2004-06 Arthouse at the Jones Center, *New American Talent 19* traveling exhibition, Austin, Texas; juror Jerry Saltz, Senior Art Critic, *The Village Voice*, New York
 2005 2040 Gallery, *Endless Summer*, Austin, Texas
 2004 Arcaute Arte Contemporaneo, *Los Americanos*, Monterrey, Mexico
 AMVETS, *Post 65*, Marfa, Texas
 2003 Guadalupe Arts Center, *Eclectic Gathering*, Austin, Texas
 2040 Gallery, *Cicada*, Austin, Texas
 1991 Pik Me Up Espresso Café, *Good for Amusement Only*, Los Angeles, California

PUBLICATIONS

- 2006 *Photography Now: One Hundred Portfolios* DVD-ROM, organized by Wright State University, Dayton, Ohio
 "Biennial Southwest' takes folks into the world of cutting-edge contemporary art," *The Albuquerque Tribune*, October, 2006
 "Albuquerque Museum 'Biennial Southwest' Picks Up Pieces of Other Shows," *The Albuquerque Journal*, September, 2006
 "Photographs, book signing featured at Galleri Urbane's show Friday," *Big Bend Sentinel*, August, 2006
 2005 "Oh, Give Me a Home," *The Austin Chronicle*, July, 2005
 "The 20th 'New American Talent' exhibition reveals a country struggling with isolation and power," *The Austin Chronicle*, July, 2005
 "Don't judge work of 'New American Talent' artists by the curator's essay," *The Austin American Statesman*, June, 2005
 2004 "Top 7 Individual Artists of 2004," *Austin Chronicle*, January, 2004
 "Wonder Women," *bRILLIANT Magazine*, August, 2004
 "They Like Me, They Really Like Me," *GlassTire*, August, 2004
 "Calendar," *Photo District News*, July, 2004
 "Curator Weaves New Craftiness Into Expanded 'New American Talent' Show," *The Austin American Statesman*, July, 2004
 "Out and About," *The Good Life*, June, 2004
 "A Piece of Work," *Austin Chronicle*, August, 2003



This Panel: *Daily Powder Fresh Disposable Deodorizing Mist*, 2007. Color Photograph. 30" x 30".

Cover Panel: *Preparing for Miss Chanel Lee*, 2007. Color Photograph. 30" x 30".



First Kiss, 2006. Color Photograph. 30" x 30".

WOMEN & THEIR WORK

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Known for its pioneering spirit, embrace of artistic innovation, and commitment to Texas audiences and artists, Women & Their Work is now celebrating its 29th anniversary. It presents over 50 events a year in visual art, dance, theater, music, literature, and film. The gallery features on-going exhibitions of Texas women artists and brings artists of national stature to Texas audiences. Since its founding, Women & Their Work has presented 1,784 artists in 245 visual art exhibitions, 107 music, dance, and theater events, 13 film festivals, 20 literary readings, and 326 workshops in programming that reflects the ethnic and cultural diversity of this region. Nationally recognized, Women & Their Work has been featured in *Art in America*, *ArtForum* and on National Public Radio and was the first organization in Texas to receive a grant

in visual art from the National Endowment for the Arts. Women & Their Work reaches over 2,500 school children and teachers each year through gallery tours, gallery talks with exhibiting artists, participatory workshops, in-school performances, dance master classes, and teacher workshops.



WOMEN & THEIR WORK

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Special thanks to BAH! Design.

