

JACK BUTLER

Re-examining Reality and Artifice

In the mid 1970s Jack Butler began making photographs that were derived from pictures taken out of the American print media. Throughout the past decade Butler has continued using these media representations of men and women to expose the subliminal messages of these mass photographs and to examine how we see ourselves. Butler has been intrigued by the ubiquity of the media pictures, their visual messages, and their artificiality, and our acceptance of them as desirable role models. They superficially offer us models of a lifestyle with wealth, sophistication, energy, and enjoyment. These pictures are significant from a sociological viewpoint for they reveal how a society views itself and something of its own conception of the ideal state. Butler questions this mirror of society by re-working the original images, disclosing hidden aspects. He gets to the essence of the picture, finding the messages that are often quite different from the original.

Jack Butler has never been interested in going out and taking photographs, a characteristic he shares with many other artists working with photography, especially in California. Butler's background in painting and design constantly asserts itself in his photographs. The painting reinforces the artificiality of the original images, bringing our attention to the stagy, often ludicrous portrayal and emphasizing certain details, while obliterating others.

There is an intentional anonymity to the figures in Butler's works, achieved in large part through his brushwork, which flattens out the faces, eliminating particulars and rendering the figures as neutral stereotypes. This masking emphasizes the sexuality of the pairs and renders them as objects not people, which is indeed their original mass media purpose. The masking also creates a tension between the creditable reality of a photograph and the artificial.

These characteristics are apparent in Butler's series *Excitable Pages*, which he undertook from 1978-1983. He challenges the manner in which the media portray men and

women and calls into question the disparate roles of women found in the press. The images were culled from newspapers and magazines, painted over, and then re-photographed by Butler. The resulting Cibachrome prints were painted on as well. It is important to note that the representation of women, at times seemingly in an exploitative manner, comes directly from our mass media. Butler questions the portrayal. By painting over the original found pictures, he reveals the hidden persuaders. He shows the inherent violence or tension by removing identifying labels, or by painting a black strip over the eyes – small changes that totally alter the message and impact of the image. In this way he draws on socially accepted stereotypes, bringing us again back to mass media as a source of visual language but causing us to look more closely at what the picture is actually saying.

Towards the end of the series the figures became increasingly flattened, schematized, and removed from a scene. This heightened artificiality and intentional two-dimensionality became a key element in Butler's next group, the "Together" Series/*The Look*, 1984. This group of ten unique works, each 40 × 30 inch Cibachrome prints discloses the blatant superficiality of fashion that rules our culture. In this group the physical tension of the preceding series is eliminated. Butler sharply reduces the weight of his figures to flat two dimensional representations. This also serves to emphasize the unreal, if not fraudulent high fashion ideal. These works are created by collaging found figures taken from fashion ads against decorative backgrounds. By altering the dress to flat patterns, or by painting out areas, Butler points to the passing veneer of surface decoration that fashion values. His subjects are mere anonymous mannequins, lacking depth or character. But as Butler acknowledges, there is also a theatrical reference to Japanese kabuki in his white faced figures. An element of "Iroke" can be seen in these works, where his "masked" figures exude an enticing combination of charm

and seduction, of real and unreal, gradually mesmerizing the audience.

In 1985 Butler undertook another group of ten works, once again using commercial images, the Western "Where" Series. These 20 × 16 inch Cibachromes similarly make use of the anonymous white faceless mannekins for the figures. The striking contrast between the clear three dimensionality of the torsos, the blank faces, and the faked backdrop of the stereotypical western background brings our attention to the details. Again Butler starts with a collage using the original advertisement models, again setting the figures out from the background so that they cast a shadow. The poses underscore the attention to sexual interaction and the carefully manicured Western look that has been perpetuated over the decades since the beginning of movies. Following the dictum that "clothes make the man", Butler examines how readily anyone can become a cowboy, simply by wearing the symbols Butler uses the cliché in these montaged images, from the clothing to the heavily saturated sunsets and the archetypal cactus landscape that symbolizes the West.

The Trial series begun in 1987 represents a significant departure from Butler's preceding work. Again he utilized the found media image form the basis of the series. He eschewed the heavily handpainted color Cibachrome print for a stark black and white medium. Several years ago Butler bought a batch of glossy eight-by-ten inch photos that had been shot by a press photographer during a sensational murder trial in the early sixties. More intriguing was the uncanny fact that they seemed to be stills from an old film or an early TV drama, or how life so closely imitated art. At 38 × 49 inches the works have an arresting physical presence that draws us into the drama that somehow seems so familiar from TV.

Like his other works, the Trial photographs deal in broad media clichés that enable us to construct a narrative. Butler assists his viewer by including captions. And as with the pho-

tographs, the captions are excerpted from the printed page. This is the first instance of text in Butler's pictures, and this device is logical and effective because it is so closely allied with news photos in real life. Just as the photographs have an ambiguity about them, so too do the captions. They initially appear to explain the image, but instead address more general issues. The title "Surrender and Survival" for example, suggests the dynamics behind the murderers' own desperate desire for survival, surrendering to the attorney's strategy.

Consistent with the other groups Butler paints over parts of the original found photo, creating masks for the characters and diminishing the particulars. Thus we see gestures and figures rather than exact individuals, as Butler is interested in the generic type. Again the painterly effect of white flattens the reality into an artificial two-dimensionality, and the figures become ambiguous and strange. Collage is used, further reinforcing the visual tension between the precise, believable photographic reality and the theatrical.

This group deals with universal emotions of love and death, of murder and survival, of crime and punishment, not unlike the major themes of contemporary American television. The murder victim is visually reduced to mere documentary evidence, appearing as only a detail in a small 8 × 10 inch photograph. The starkness of the black and white image underscores the dramatic quality. Although no violence is illustrated, the group addresses the violence that is part of modern life. With this group Butler illustrates how thoroughly our notion of reality is colored by fiction. And like the other groups he questions the interaction and roles of men and women as they are re-played to us through contemporary media images.

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