

**THESE ARE THE FORMS THAT WE LIVE WITH, REPRINTED IN "NATURE" -
WHITECHAPPEL GALLERY/MIT PRESS**

A Conversation with Thyrza Nichols Goodeve, 1999

Thyrza Nichols Goodeve (TNG): I'd like to start by discussing your respective lives before Aziz + Cucher. What kind of art were each of you making before working together?

Anthony Aziz (A): My earliest passion was for documentary film and that led me to photography. But I never approached photography from any conventional point of view. In graduate school I was working with large format image and text projects, installations dealing with photography and language. The work mostly dealt with issue of masculinity and power. My work at that time was influenced by feminism and the politics of representation, as well as the impact of AIDS on sexual desire. I did a series called "Public Image/Private Sector" in which I photographed older white men first in their formal corporate attire and then stark naked. The text was based on the kind of power language these individuals would use as a way of marking themselves as a corporation. The work addressed corporate culture as well as issues of male privilege.

Sammy Cucher (C): My arrival into art was circuitous. I studied theater and had illusions of becoming a theater director when I was very young. I went to college to study drama at the experimental theater wing at New York University. I was immersed in the whole notion of the New York avant-garde theater until 1985. I wanted to create a non-linear operatic masterpieces involving music and visuals. Then I went back to Venezuela where I met a number of people in the visual arts who were experimenting with video. I started to work with narrative in video but then the video work became installation, and it jumped into a non-theatrical gallery space. Four years later I decided to go to the San Francisco Art Institute to get my Masters. By that time I envisioned myself as a visual artist, primarily a video artist.

TNG: What is carried through from these earlier experiences into your current collaborative work?

C: Certainly there is the whole notion of a *mise-en-scène*. In other words our collaborative work is very fabricated, very considered. Each picture requires a whole production. In content and process, the photographs are always somehow theatrical.

TNG: Yet there are also the roots in documentary.

A: Right. Although I really moved away from documentary as a genre, my concerns have not changed. It's the approach that has changed. But ironically I've always been interested in photography for the kind of fiction it can produce. I like the fact that photography is a representational process rooted in realism; that it works within the borders between the reality of the referent and the fantasy of the image.

TNG: And you make the objects "the reality" that you photograph. And yet you clearly want the viewer to believe, to be caught up in, the actuality of those images as if they are not fabricated or mythic but born from "nature," especially in the Chimera series.

A: Yes. We want both the fabricated/fictional quality as well as the documentary/real. If you look at an object and you look at a photograph of the object, you're looking at a translation, and it is this area of translation or transformation that we are after.

C: It is the fact that these images are an illusion that is reinforced by the conventions of photographic realism that interests us. Photography has this veracity to it; the sense of documentation of a reality yet the reality we present is utterly an illusion. In this context the effect we are after is technically uncanny because it has to do precisely with the boundary between fantasy and reality.

TNG: But it's certainly a different uncanny from the uncanny say, of historical surrealism, isn't it?

A: Yes. Because these pieces are made within the context of the crossover between the biological and the biotechnological that is currently taking place. That's why we chose the title, Chimera, the mythical creature made from the forepart of a lion, the hind part of a dragon, and a middle formed from a goat.

TNG: A crossover which is producing a new notion of the uncanny based in what we can call the biotechnological unconscious. And you are ambivalent about this?

C: Yes, we experience the new biotechnological reality as both something comforting and disconcerting.

TNG: How is it comforting?

C: I'll talk about my own experience. I was diagnosed with HIV in 1989, and was very ill for a couple of years. Yet, I owe my current active life to the fact that there were medicines developed out of recent research in bioengineering which allowed scientists to study the AIDS virus and design these very particular drugs that attack or inhibit its replication. It's an example of how our ability to tamper with the bio-molecular world through technology has produced Protease Inhibitors which have literally changed the relationship of my body to the AIDS virus. Whereas once my body was just deteriorating before my very eyes, now it's a body that functions very well. It's an active body.

TNG: Your discussion of your body as "deteriorating" before your very eyes, makes me think about the relevance of abjection to the 1980s and early 1990s and how abjection is no longer as useful, or prevalent a mode, to the art of the mid- to late 90s. Currently we are in a different paradigm, one where "the active body" of biotechnological research is what is at issue and therefore different notions of what we are "naturally." And such a new notion of the body has a future; it is actually about the future.

C: Right, in the mid- to late 80s in relation to AIDS, the abjection of the body was its "truth;" one couldn't understand the body in any other way because all we knew was illness and death. Now the reality of living with AIDS as an active body with a future is my reality.

A: Perhaps AIDS made us both more aware of this split between the experience of the deteriorating body versus the active/reanimated body. With this in mind, it's interesting how our work has always dealt with both the very attractive and the very abject.

TNG: Does this also pertain to the chimeras? Although superficially they might look abject, these images seem to be about something coming into existence, rather than deteriorating; some kind of transformation.

C: I think you're right. It's not about decay, it's about birth. Birth of a new form, of a new possibility that might be awful but we don't yet know. We say we're working in a post-Benjamin kind of aesthetic in the sense that we're pondering the possibility of a new aura. Where the age of mechanical reproduction introduced the loss of the aura according to Benjamin, the age of biotechnical reproduction offers the production of a new kind of aura.

TNG: In terms of the current work's relationship to the body, I think of Deleuze's notion of "the body without organs" that was so influential in the late 80s and early 90s because your chimeras are really organs without the body, aren't they?

A: Yes, they are all the organs that didn't find a body! (laughter.)

TNG: I've never really understood what the body without organs really meant but looking at these I certainly what organs without a body are. Which is actually quite pertinent to the world we live in now, where there is a possibility of building whole organs from stem cells and so on. Yet these organ-like body-beings that appear in the chimera series are what prompt the association with surrealism. I use Donna Haraway's term "cyborg surrealism" to describe such work.

A: That could be a way to describe how we approached the sculptures in Plasmorphica, the body of work that precedes this one. They were produced via the modernist method of assemblage—taking different materials and combining them to make a new form and then covering them with plastic skin.

TNG: Which erases the sense of the different parts. By covering them with a plastic skin you erase the joints, so to speak, erase the premise Modernist assemblage is based upon which is the combining of disparate materials or genres in such a way as to shock. In Plasmorphica you were beginning to explore this notion of the creation of new beings. Kind of Frankenstein's monster without the sutures.

A: Yes, the sculptures in Plasmorphica are made up of electronic and consumer products that are combined in completely absurd ways. But something I'd like to stress is that it's important to us that these hybrid creatures come out of the material that is literally around us. The original sculptures were made from things that were all purchased at Radio Shack or on Canal Street or at Office Depot. In other words these are the forms that we live with, transformed through the assemblage process and now re-photographed and transformed yet further.

C: This is why the name Chimera seems so apt to describe them because, as assemblage, they are a particular type of contemporary hybrid being based on the idea of these appliances as prosthesis.

TNG: As I alluded to above, monster is the broader term often used for the notion of the hybrid. But monsters are also associated with medical anomalies and were often used as figures in theorizations of the 80s and early 90s which was a much more gothic period. I like shifting from the term "monster" to "chimera" as you have in order to denote the texture of the transformations we are talking about. Such a difference in name signals the same turn away from abjection we mentioned before. Also "chimera" refers specifically to the fabula of myth. I think of the way Donna Haraway in her theory, or Matthew Barney in his art, use myth to go where we haven't yet been, but are certainly going in terms of biotechnology and new notions of what it is to be "human." And as I look at these images from the chimera series they change into so many different things. I see torsos and amputated limbs as well as strange whole creatures, surrealistic objects, and so on.

C: Someone said to us recently that the chimeras remind them of pieces in some strange game turned into fetishes, like in a game of chess. And we are happy with that kind of interpretation because figures in a game of chess all carry a symbolic, almost animistic meaning. And we're very interested in discovering a poetics and some kind of depth for this new biotechnological world we are entering into.

A: And I realize now that we are not dealing with hybridity only as a metaphor but also as an artistic process. In other words it's very important to see all of this work as a practice that conflates sculpture, photography and digital processes.

TNG: What about the interiors?

A: The interiors are our newest work. They represent a point of departure into work that is more lyrical and poetic, as well as maintaining the sense of objects that are deeply psychologically charged. Yet, we see a connection with our dystopia series.

TNG: In what sense?

A: In the sense that the viewer is presented with an enclosure of skin. But in this case, the viewer occupies metaphorically the space of the photograph. The Dystopia series were external portraits of subjects that had “turned inwards.”

TNG: I always felt they were subjects in the process of imploding. In other words they were so muffled that the organ that connected them to the world had basically degenerated.

C: Perhaps. But these interiors take such a notion of “turning inwards” into a phenomenological experience of the world. As a result, there occurs both a sense of disorientation and identification with the feeling one has of being inside of one’s body. Celeste Olalquiaga in “Megalopolis”(1) uses the term “psychasthenia” borrowed from Roger Caillois’s 1938 essay, “Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia.”(2) In her book she describes a subject that is incapable of demarcating the boundaries of its own body; a subject that has been lost in the immensity that surrounds it.

A: What’s interesting to us is the way Olalquiaga uses Caillois’s discussion of psychasthenia as a metaphor for contemporary or postmodern experience in general. Frederic Jameson describes a similar effect in his analysis of postmodern architecture, where the interplay between reflective and transparent surfaces creates a disorienting experience such that the subject can no longer distinguish the exterior environment from the interior. In Caillois’s example taken from the insect world, the psychasthenic organism abandons its own physical identity, taking on the markings of the environment outside of itself as a form of camouflage. Our interiors are perhaps a form of inverse psychasthenia, where the external environment disappears utterly into the subject’s consciousness.

TNG: The subject’s consciousness or the subject’s perception?

A: Isn’t consciousness developed through perception?

TNG: What you are describing has roots in Romanticism, but one induced by the nature of the new technology of digital and virtual realities rather than the psychological or emotional state of the viewer.

A: Perhaps that is what we are interested in—it’s certainly what happens with our experience of cyberspace, where the whole informational universe is contained by the digital network and internalized by the user. Also one can look at a growing trend in architecture which uses computer technology to interface buildings with the body.

C: At MIT and other places people are talking about sentient rooms that are designed to become almost like a prosthetic human environment. Our interiors take the psychasthenic utopia envisioned by so many techno and virtual reality gurus to its logical circuitous conclusion, fulfilling the dream of a regressive womb-like space where there is no longer a separation between subject and environment; where all interaction is one steady stream of sensorial data.

A: But I really want to stress that with the Interiors, we are in no way illustrating any of these cyborg theories. We are much more interested in looking for a visual poetics that generates a psychological response in the viewer. Of course, it may reflect our moment, but we would like to believe that these images have a staying power that goes beyond our time. We are indeed trying to approach that space of myth that you referred to earlier.

C: As a purely mythical image, the Interiors are like “mirrors of flesh.”

TNG: Meaning what exactly? That the skin itself is a reflective surface or mirror as in the example of the mimicry of certain insects in the forest or as in the psychological state of psychasthenia?

C: Well, all of the above. That is the ambiguity that comes from working with images of skin, which is so loaded with meaning, and we're just trying to add to that history of meaning and expanding those associations, drawing from what we see around us but also giving way to our imagination.