

MATT LIPPS: HORIZON/S – An Interview with Matt Lipps

Written by Seth Curcio
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Matt Lipps, *Untitled (Standing)*, 2010 | 40" x 53"

Matt Lipps' newest body of work *HORIZON/S*, flips the traditional mode of institutional curating on its head. In this series, Lipps appropriates content from a late 1950s arts and culture publication that promises to offer a curated selection of international culture that will add a sense of sophistication to anyone's taste. From these images, Lipps' playfully explores what happens to the meaning of certain objects and images when you remix them into new systems and categories – altering both content and context.

DailyServing's founder Seth Curcio, recently spoke to the artist about the physical construction of his mysterious photographs, the ubiquity of images today, and how his own taste emerges from the appropriated pages of *Horizon Magazine*.

Seth Curcio: So Matt, currently you have an exhibition on view at Jessica Silverman Gallery in San Francisco, titled *HORIZON/S*. The series pulls from cultural images that transcend time, location, and cultures. But, before we dive into these ideas, I'd like to learn some basics, like how these images are constructed. They seem so mysterious – can you walk me through the process of finding your source material and constructing the image?

Matt Lipps: Sure, this body of work, like the majority of my work since 2004, is an entirely analog process involving sculpture, collage, and theater staging on a small scale with a cast of paper dolls that I've cut out and propped up with supports so that they can stand on their own.

For *HORIZON/S* I pulled from the first 10 years of *Horizon Magazine*, a bi-monthly hardback arts journal first published in September 1958. The magazine's inaugural issue sets up a general invitation to the American people to join the editors of the magazine on a voyage towards an imagined "horizon" of high art and culture – examining art(ifacts), architecture, theater & film actors, and

serving up what would be fine “taste” for those who weren’t in the know – a relatively antiquated way of thinking about art objects.

SC: Your work is ultimately exhibited as photography. Yet, your process starts with an appropriated image, moves into sculpture, draws heavily on painting, and employs the tools of theater. Ultimately it arrives back at an image. What do you feel happens in this transformation of material?

ML: I’m not sure that I know, but the transformation is evident, and heartfelt for me, too – which is what keeps me engaged in making the work. For me it has something to do with an embodied, phenomenological experience of encountering an image in a dislocated context at an unexpected size. Certainly, the scale of the image is key to this transformation, and photography allows me to play with scale and depth in ways that traditional collage doesn’t. I’ve done several works that exist as sculpture, but it’s generally a frontal presentation that fails to some degree when attempted to view “in the round,” and, the work feels diminished somewhat as mere paperdolls of an expected size.

Re-photographing those images back into a photograph brings a certain amount of seamlessness to the foreground and background that, I hope, holds the viewer’s attention for slightly longer. This is especially tricky in *HORIZON/S* when you’re confronted with photographic reproductions of varying quality and scale, that depict stone sculptures, painting fragments, illusionistic spaces, portraits, landscapes, etc., and it’s all tied back together and hermetically sealed under the photographic picture plane.

SC: I like to consider how you categorize images and ideas in your practice and how this aligns and deviates from the basic cultural structuring – or lumping – that engages most museums. I know that *HORIZON/S* is also further divided in to two parts: Private and Public Collections. What are the main distinctions of these two collections?

ML: In assembling a cast of about 200 characters, obvious trends presented themselves – not only in my image selection process, but also in the kinds of images that were reproduced in the original magazine. This is highlighted when examining what size they were reproduced as, and whether or not they were printed in full color, black and white, or at times photogravure.

These decisions were made by the editors, thereby producing a secondary hierarchical structure. When all of the images are set to stand on their own, it’s clear to see what was deemed central to the idea of cultivating good taste, and what genres of art were seen as marginal or clearly dwarfed in comparison.

An example of Public Collections – the first photograph I made in the series – is *Untitled (Women’s Heads)*. I pulled from the group every image I had cut out that was only of a female head and shoulders, to see what that image would look like. In the magazine, as in art history and by extension museums and archives, it’s necessary to organize objects by region, chronology, and/or genre so that they can be “knowable,” or classified into a system. My project aims to question the logic of that practice, and asks what else can be learned from a different system of objects if set free from the typical constraints of the archive and introduced to elements of chance, disorganization, and a personalized re-mixing of art and art historical objects.

But, there were other connections I was making with individual objects that had no logical connection, other than the fact I was compelled to make pictures incorporating them. From this started the parallel series I call Private Collections – the idea being, rather than making a

photograph curated around a single homogeneous premise to communicate a single idea, I would make photographs of disparate objects culled together by an individual taste. This act allows for a more narrative story about the individual who may have collected them to emerge.

SC: In this way, you are able to simultaneously mine images and objects that are collected and organized by institutions, and then by you as an artist. Obviously, the result speaks to your own taste, however someone else sets the parameters. This type of curating from existing structures references our remix culture. How do you feel the ubiquity of images and excelled sharing of cultural information affects our perception of the world? Especially since so much of this information is already organized or “curated” by others.

ML: Previously, I had always talked about my work in relationship to “desire,” rather than “taste.” But, with *HORIZON/S* – a broader examination of taste-refinement is brought to the fore. To answer your question about the ubiquity of images and excelled sharing of information...I only feel safe answering how I feel it affects my perception of the world. It’s fantastic! It’s horrific! There are images I can never scrub out of my mind – that I wish I’d never laid eyes on...there are others I’ve had deep and meaningful relationships with/to (and, I mean this with much gravity). As an appropriation artist, I’m grateful to have these tools to employ, and I aim to do so with integrity and sincerity. If I were to offer a word of caution about the endless production and distribution of images, it’s that one might grow comfortably numb – that they’d lose their affect and ability to trigger outrage and mobilize change. Or, that people think they know the operation of any given image before taking the time to read it, because of some imaginary typological vault of pictures that contain finite and quantifiable data. That seems lazy to me, and, in part, with this project, I was trying in my own way to “re-mix” that.

SC: That’s great insight on how you relate to imagery, both images selected by you and the endless barrage of images in the world. I’m also interested in how *HORIZON/S* remains so seemingly objective in nature, in contrast to the pictures in *HOME SERIES*. Was there a shift from your previous work that caused you to engage in a project that allows for your personal narrative to remain distant?

ML: There has been a shift, but for me, it’s been at a glacial pace starting from the first photograph I can remember cutting out when I was thirteen years old. The practice has always been about having a relationship with a person, place, or object – a photographic distance announced in the mediation of that object in its image-ness.

Early on in my work, this longing was explicit: my desire to be with a body pictured in a magazine to act as surrogate lover/boyfriend, resurrected from a late-1970’s pre-AIDS moment in time. It was a willful exertion of my desire for him to sit with me on our bed, and to take his portrait, thereby re-flattening him into a Barthesian photographic flat-death (again). For me, that work is about melancholia and loss in as much as it’s about a personalized, magical desire.

Coming to terms with my own sexuality and understanding the operation of these images in relationship to my desire, I was able to formalize a vocabulary around my work and turn it into a language that was legible across multiple genres of photography. This, in turn, allowed me to move past my immediate biography (though, never that far removed from it), and look at broader reaching themes in my work.

Fast-forward to the *HOME* series, I still incorporated ideas of desire (or, taste, or, selection) and loss in relationship to a personalized history of photography literally housed and cultivated within my

childhood home. There, I'm compiling a cataclysmic dichotomy of "high vs. low" that examines the accrual of objects and memories in an intimate, domestic space in relationship to an unpacking of heroic baggage.

And, now with *HORIZON/S*, where it might appear as though I've stripped back all of the personal narrative found in earlier modules, I still employ my vocabulary of image-making, and its deeply concerned with ideas about photographic representation and the desire to understand its operation with respect to art history and the cultivation of taste. It still feels very me, even if I'm less apparent than before.

SC: Do you feel that you have reached a state of completion with *HORIZON/S*? Is there often a clear stopping point in your series, or do you feel that you can continue it indefinitely?

ML: The impulse to "re-mix" *HORIZON/S* was endless – so, yes, it could have gone on indefinitely! In fact, I shot at least 50 images that I thought worked well – but it was ultimately edited down to about 22 photographs. Being a photographer and carrying the burden of seriality is always a delicate balance of editing, and having good friends and mentors helping you see your blind spots.

But, I ended up working on *HORIZON/S* for almost two years, mostly pre-production and making decisions about the look of the final image. Now, I'm feeling pretty done. Though, I will say that it was fascinating to watch people look at these images, and their need to know who each person/object was – a desire to unlock a deeper logic, or to give name to something that seems familiar but forgotten. I would be curious to push that notion further, partnered with my own fascination with how images traditionally operate, and how I might continue to confound that.