



Ian Wallace *Meta Masculin/Féminin*

Jessica Silverman Gallery, San Francisco

Ian Wallace's recent *Meta Masculin/Féminin* [April 24–June 20, 2015], exhibited at Jessica Silverman Gallery, San Francisco, foregrounded the artist's position as one of the founders of photoconceptualism, and demonstrated its ongoing influence upon his work. The show was inspired by the Jean-Luc Godard film *Masculin Féminin: 15 Faits Précis* (*Masculine Feminine: 15 Specific Events*) (1966), known for its style of improvised cinéma vérité—an observational, detached approach that also characterizes the photographs here. Wallace's homage consists of several series of photographs, all grounded in cinematography and thematically related to fractures in gaze, gesture, and relationship. Although the exhibition is overtly concerned with the theme of gender conflict, it is a clinical approach to affects of alienation and estrangement in general that linger long after leaving the gallery.

The different series are all in some way related, either formally or thematically, to creating various narrative threads that intersect around the dramatic rift or moment of rupture between romantic couples. Almost without exception, the show features photographs of two people who are literally cut apart from each other, formally separated by space and blocks of paint on the canvas, as in *Cutaway I* and *Cutaway II* (both 2015), which vertically

slice through a photograph of two people—perhaps a couple—obstructing our ability to read their relationship through body language, to a surprising degree.

The titular *Masculin/Féminin* series, begun in 1996, uses cropped stills from French New Wave films, whereas the more recent *Event Structure* series (2007–ongoing) stages scenes featuring couples on the streets of Paris—typical of the staged photographs from what came to be known as the Vancouver school of photoconceptualism, of which Wallace was a founder. This school challenged the devaluation of the image traditional in conceptualism, emphasized photographic rigor, and revived the discipline's historical and social consciousness. Wallace's newer work has reflections of the theatrical tableaux of Jeff Wall—whom Wallace mentored—and Rodney Graham's intimate self-portraits. In turning from stills found in French and Italian New Wave films to creating stills for films of his own imagining, Wallace draws attention not only to the relationship between the cinematic and the photographic, but to our instinct to create narratives where none exist.

It is Wallace's trademark, of sorts, that his photographs are presented against monochromatic blocks of acrylic paint. The result is one of disorientation, which in turn translates the personal loss of estrangement into a formal, even painterly concern. The opacity and flatness of the acrylic material contrasts deeply with the “readability” of Wallace's romantic narratives, in which presumptive couples look at, past, or seemingly beyond each other. These qualities contribute to a productive pastiche, which challenges the ostensible medium-specifics of high modernism and breaks down, materially and formally, any attempts to read the works as utterances of a single visual vocabulary.

The strong presence of the ubiquitous “gaze” in Wallace's work to date is a very assertive reference to film theory (particularly Laura Mulvey's concept of the male gaze); the overwhelming effect of the show is one of longing kept always at a distance. In *Event Structure*, Wallace's newest series, photographs are at times presented in sequential pairs, seemingly related by cause and effect, and thus suggestive of truly linear narrative. These recent works thus convey a kind of hope, particularly in the urban scenes: not only does this temporal element convey a sense of *progress*, it also effectively documents the very *process* of making the work. They are, de facto, photographs of works very literally “in progress,” and facilitate a meta-theatrical level of interpretation to the exhibition. That this documentary aspect is part of the works' intended function is evident in what Wallace calls a “text-sculpture” vitrine presenting ephemeral evidence of the artist's process, including his written commentary and negatives.

Wallace's titular reference to masculine/feminine binary systems seems somewhat secondary, almost reductive, in the context of the show's holistic complexity. Its task is simply to draw attention to the language of binary opposition as such—be it reflective of gender difference, of the supposed divide between photography and painting, or of visual contact and perceptual isolation. What *Meta Masculin/Féminin* reveals is not only an artist still in his critical prime, but also a skill at making even the most basic interpretative impulses into arousing puzzles.

—Monica Westin

ABOVE: Ian Wallace, installation view of *Meta Masculin/Féminin* [courtesy of the artist and Jessica Silverman Gallery]