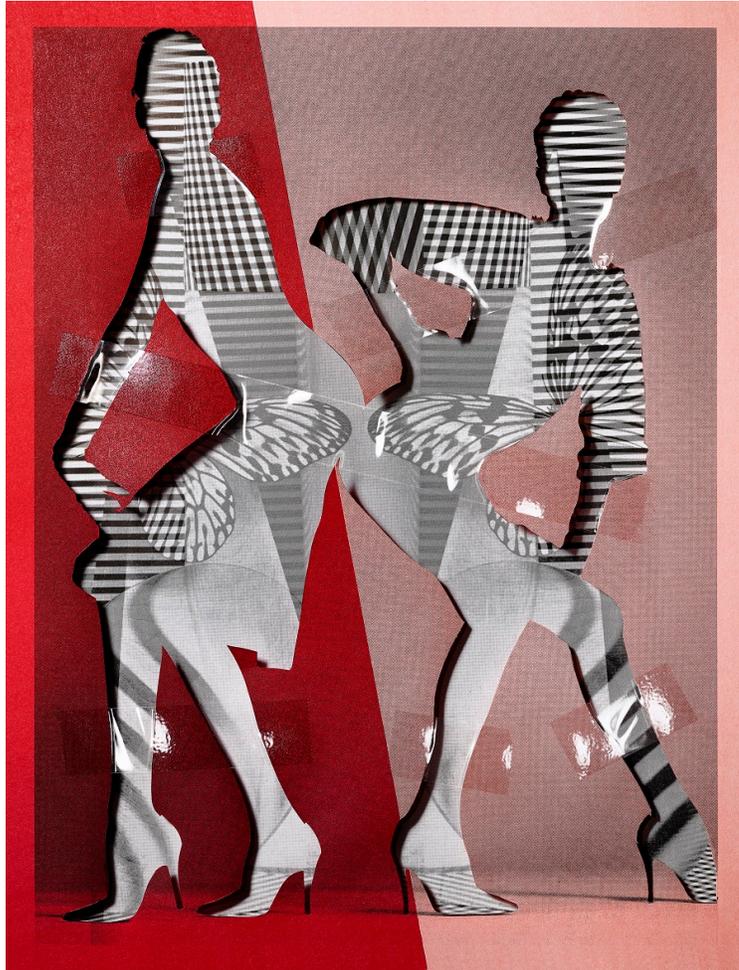


PHOTOFAIRS

IN FOCUS: Matt Lipps | The Craft of Constructed Photography

Written by Photofairs

December 2019



© Matt Lipps, Align, When Figure Becomes Ground, 2019. Courtesy of the artist and Jessica Silverman Gallery (San Francisco)

With a creative career of twenty years, American artist **Matt Lipps** has perfected his unique photographic collaging style. His inspiration stems from the glossy glamour magazines of the 90s which he would intricately examine as a teenager, prompting Lipps to explore the art of fashion photography and thus develop his own interpretation. Lipps' work can now be found in the permanent collections of many prestigious institutions, including LACMA, Saatchi Gallery and The Getty. PHOTOFAIRS were delighted to present the works of Lipps at our San Francisco Fair in 2017 with **Jessica Silverman Gallery**.

In this week's **IN FOCUS** interview, we had the opportunity to discuss with Lipps his attraction towards these iconic fashion photographs, the concept of 'Constructed' and 'Found' Photography in relation to his practice, and an insight into his most recent solo exhibition 'Where Figure Becomes Ground' at Jessica Silverman Gallery...

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© Matt Lipps, Fluid, When Figure Becomes Ground, 2019. Courtesy of the artist and Jessica Silverman Gallery (San Francisco)
PF: Your recent exhibition at Jessica Silverman Gallery 'Where Figure Becomes Ground' delicately merges iconic 90s fashion campaigns with documentary photographs. Why did you decide to use such juxtaposing magazines?

ML: There isn't really a decisive moment for me; but, rather a process of becoming that began before I consciously entered into art. I was 15 in 1990 and I had two parallel practices in photography. One unfolded in public— learning the technical, historical, and theoretical aspects of the medium as it intersected the canon of art. The other played out in private—in the bedroom of a young, queer kid seduced into the slick, glamorous world of Supermodels on the pages of fashion magazines. While the former appealed to my intellect and sparked curiosity for all things the apparatus of photography could offer; it was the latter that engendered in me a feeling of kinship and self-possession—that Linda, Christy, Naomi, et al. would safely usher me through the turbulence of adolescence and aid in the construction of a serviceable identity. The kinds of pictures that populated these disparate arenas of learning couldn't be more different... but, isn't it interesting that we call all of these things photographs? Where is the intersection of fashion photography and photojournalism; and, how do these distinct genres uniquely tap into photography's magical ability to manufacture emotion, script identity, warp memory, and dictate desire? The lexicon we use to describe our life alongside pictures has not accelerated at the same breakneck speed at which moving and still images have grown to eclipse all other forms of communication. So, the impulse here was twofold: a pointed indexing of 1990s fashion photography into a personalized canon of photographic history, and reconciliation among the different modalities of photographic seeing, learning, and image making.



© Matt Lipps, Cut!, When Figure Becomes Ground, 2019. Courtesy of the artist and Jessica Silverman Gallery (San Francisco)

During your childhood years, it is discussed that you would immerse yourself in fashion magazines such as *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar*. What is your earliest memory of indulging in said magazines? When you saw photographs that inspired you in your youth, what would your action be?

Looking back, it's funny to think about what my notions of being an artist was or having a career in photography looked like. While still in high school, I thought I would make Ansel Adams-style pictures as my art practice, and my day-job would be working as a fashion photographer. At sixteen I asked for a subscription to *Vogue*, etc. so I could study fashion images—looking into the eyes of the models, you can sometimes see reflections of how the studio was set up, thereby reconstructing the photo shoot and creating similar effects. I wasn't interested in 90% of the magazine, so I started cutting them open and removing the pages I wanted to keep for reference—filling the most coveted images in page protectors and keeping them organized in binders. The major ad campaigns were my favorite; and they would accumulate quickly, having multiple images every month. Those were the first images I started to cut out, mount to cardboard, and make stand up on their feet. I would stage the Supermodels all over my room — it was like a discontinuous, glamorous cocktail party of tiny women on my shelves, on my headboard, and on my stereo.

Your artwork could be defined within the bracket of constructed photography. Do you think by collaging the photographs, you are able to 'construct' and develop your own narratives?

I think human beings have a need to surround themselves with images that reflect their desires; that our desire somehow becomes manifest in an embodied way when gazing into an image of it. When looking back at the history of collage there are many impulses to cut and paste and construct alternate worlds made from multiple images—from overtly political to covert and personal. The kinds of artworks that I have gravitated towards convincingly argue that there's a tendency towards marginalized, disenfranchised people utilizing collage as both a personal and political tool—especially within the LGBTQIA community. Originally, this strategy played out with my desire to share intimate space with pictures of specific kinds of bodies. But, as I waded deeper into the flow of images throughout history, my intention was not to construct a linear or prescriptive narrative, but rather a "choose your own adventure" of prompts—allowing the viewer to reconsider the narratives they had constructed around photographs they already knew.



© Matt Lipps, Dance, When Figure Becomes Ground, 2019. Courtesy of the artist and Jessica Silverman Gallery (San Francisco)

"When a photograph or photographer isn't searchable online, when it retains the 'strange' in stranger, those are the pictures that stay enigmatic and, for me, the most seductive"

Matt Lipps

What do you think constructed/manipulated photography says about contemporary photography today? Does this give artists more freedom to create?

The rate at which we consume images and the level of sophistication in our visual literacy is exciting and unnerving! I think it's pretty challenging for an artist to create a single photographic image of the world—a single portrait, still life, landscape, or even abstraction image—and have it resonate at a level that it once did. Not impossible...but, increasingly rare. Generally speaking, a portrait will always only be that portrait; and, a landscape will always only be that landscape. But a portrait juxtaposed with a landscape doesn't neatly resolve as either. Meaning becomes fugitive and the viewer's mind becomes animated in attempting to reconcile the images, thereby creating multiple new reads of the work. So, I'd say it gives artists more possibility or potential in their work.



© Matt Lipps, Library, 2012-13. Courtesy of the artist and Jessica Silverman Gallery (San Francisco)

The series 'Library' (2012-13) honors the rich history of the photographic medium. Do you believe that many of these core photographic techniques and methods have been lost or forgotten in the midst of new media?

There are probably some aspects that have fallen away; I'm thinking mostly of experimental processes that aren't possible without the creative space of a traditional chemical darkroom. However, I would imagine that most of the image capture part of photography (taking pictures) is much the same. The 'Library' series drew from the encyclopedic wealth of information the Time Life Library of Photography book series famously offered up in 1972. The editors of that book series could not have imagined the foothold that photography would come to occupy in our social lives, but they certainly were aiming to write a book on visual literacy to ensure that when we take photos, we take them "properly!" I think we still make images with these gold standards in mind. More so, I think that smartphone cameras and editing software do everything possible to guarantee we get as close to those benchmarks as possible. Both of these ideas together (a model for image taking and a method of image production) limit the variations of pictures possible when you don't have a script to follow and mistakes are allowed to happen. One of the best parts about teaching photography is challenging students to unlearn some things about photography and asking them to reinvest in experimentation and embrace failure.

When searching through archives for 'found photography' to use in your artwork, is it a difficult decision what will appeal to a contemporary audience? How much do you research the history and story behind the images you find?

I liken my search to cruising culture...it really is about the pursuit and the pleasure, between me and the picture itself. My eyes flit over the pages of books and magazines trying to find an image that glances back. Similar to Roland Barthes' notions of 'studium' and 'punctum'; many images flash before my eyes and then there are a few that pierce the photographic veneer and wound me. It's almost as though the decision is made for me, and the difficulty lies in me trying to understand and articulate why. At minimum I'm reading the caption and noting the maker and date the photographs are created to provide context. But when a photograph or photographer isn't searchable online, when it retains the 'strange' in stranger, those are the pictures that stay enigmatic and, for me, the most seductive.



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