THE PHANTED IVE

DANA HOEY

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October 5-December 8, 2012

University Art Museum



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THE PHANTOM SEX

Introduction

Corinna Ripps Schaming

his book and its companion exhibition mounted at the University Art Museum mark the first time in over ten years that Dana Hoey's recent work has been examined in relation to her previous body of work. Forgoing a chronological approach, both the book and the museum's open floor plan allow for a gradual and associative reading of the work in a kind of evidentiary unfolding. The book in your hands includes fifty-nine photographs, while the exhibition includes twenty-eight photographs carefully selected by the artist; viewed in tandem, they provide us with a comprehensive understanding of Hoey's remarkable career.

Through her photography, Dana Hoey has examined for more than twenty years what it means to be female. The early photographs establish windows into the often cruel, troubled, and invisible dynamics of female relationships. Some offer a tenuous affirmation of female bonds, and occasionally the male sexual presence enters the frame. She has often been compared to other "girl photographers" who came to prominence in the late 1990s; art historian and critic Katy Siegel noted that the emergence of this group signaled the first generation of artists to "take for granted the twin (if antithetical) lessons of Cindy Sherman and Nan Goldin." Since then, Hoey has charted her own course, veering away from easy thematic categorization and moving in and out of stylistic genres.

Using both staged and directed photography, her meticulously constructed pictures speak to her deep knowledge of the art and its ability to conflate fact and fiction. Her seemingly spontaneous pictures are choreographed through simple directives and are subject to her ruthless editorial eye, which is always attuned to bringing social dynamics to the fore. Formally, her pictures often combine the sunny daylight and saturated color of commercial, digitally enhanced film stock with the iconography and framing of religious painting. Her early work claims influences as diverse as Bernini's *Ecstasy of St. Teresa* and Philip Roth's *American Pastoral* and reveals a fascination with mythic narratives, corrupted idealism, and the power of heedless actions. More recently, Hoey has expanded her vision to include scenarios in which older women play central roles and typically female activities take on elevated status.

In a calculated and targeted departure from earlier work, Hoey's *Pattern Recognition* series combines original and appropriated images arranged into the kaleidoscopic patterns of traditional sewn quilts. Juxtaposing her own portraits of older women with porn nudes, she fractures the picture plane while turning her back on any semblance of pictorial narrative. She envisions her subjects breaking out of predictable social patterns to reveal the messy contingencies involved in restructuring their world. The results are large, vibrant photographic collages that play geometric patterns against twisted social norms.

In her most recent pictures, resin casts of her own and friends' bodies, found sculptures, and plastic tarps serve as stand-ins for Hoey's human subjects. With her unflinching forensic eye, she sets aside the residual effects of constructing identities with a camera and posits alternative ways of "seeing" women through its lens. Yet what are we to make of two recent photographs: a wrapped hammer pictured on red ground, and two arrow-headed rocks on gray cloth, one real, the other cast? Hoey presents these rudimentary and outmoded tools as artifacts poised for our re-evaluation. The question is: how ready are we to think anew?

The University Art Museum and its programs would not be possible without the ongoing support of University at Albany President George M. Philip and Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs Susan D. Phillips. Thank you to Senior Vice Provost and Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs William B. Hedberg for his belief and confidence in the Museum's programs.

I extend my deep gratitude and admiration to Museum Director Janet Riker for her leadership and her unwavering commitment to bringing the best in contemporary art to a public university. My thanks go to all my colleagues: Zheng Hu, exhibition designer, for his spot-on design sensibility; preparator Jeffrey Wright-Sedam for his superior command of our challenging space; Naomi Lewis, exhibition and outreach coordinator, for always keeping us on track; registrar Darcie Abbatiello for her meticulous and unflagging attention to detail; Ryan Parr, collections production coordinator, for his anticipation and execution of all web-related needs; and administrative assistant Joanne Lue for always finding the right path to get the job done.

Many thanks to Friedrich Petzel and Samantha Tsao at Friedrich Petzel Gallery for their guidance and skillful efforts from the outset.

I commend Johanna Burton on writing a laser-sharp essay in which she strips back the many misdirected readings of Hoey's oeuvre and makes the case for re-seeing, in non-narrative terms, these remarkable pictures for all that they are (and are not).

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A special thank you to our editor, Jeanne Finley.

And to Dana Hoey, I offer my profoundest thanks. Her incisive vision both inspires and challenges us to look closely, take stock, and choose carefully as we chart our course toward an indeterminate future.

Corinna Ripps Schaming is Curator and Associate Director at the University Art Museum, University at Albany

And Others of Her Ilk

Johanna Burton

The uncanny and coercive characteristics of group formations, which are shown in the phenomenon of suggestion that accompany them, may therefore with justice be traced back to the fact of their origin from the primal hoarde. The leader of the group is still the primal father; the group still wishes to be governed by unrestricted force; it has an extreme passion for authority; in Le Bon's phrase, it has a thirst for obedience.

—Sigmund Freud, "Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego"

I. What He Saw

Near the end of an otherwise unremarkable piece written for the *Washington Post* about Dana Hoey's 2000 solo exhibition at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, the reviewer—having detailed at some length the ten photographs on view—concludes: "It is work that celebrates a kind of competitive female energy that has sometimes been viewed as self-destructive, but which Hoey and others of her ilk want to reclaim as a kind of power." He goes on to admit that "[a]s a man trying to interpret Hoey's art, I sometimes felt like I was straining to hear a soundless dog whistle. The ultra-high—some would say inaudible—frequency at which her messages of sexual politics are sent out means that not every ear is going to be able to hear them, but that doesn't mean that you shouldn't at least lean into the silence and try."²

With striking—though seemingly unintentional—clarity, the writer pinpoints a crucial (and crucially widespread) misconception attending artistic practices with ostensibly feminist agendas. Images like Hoey's, he implies, are *produced* by women to be *received* by

women; for anyone else (read: men), these are mysterious, vaguely fascinating ciphers that, for all their critical thrust, ultimately reinscribe the mythically inscrutable nature of woman herself. The writer's metaphor, however, whereby certain images operate like sounds that can be heard only by a species other than one's own, is simply the most hyperbolic example of an argument that has hovered around Hoey's work since the artist came to prominence in the 1990s. Indeed, a near-constant refrain in writings on Hoey—whether laudatory or negative in valence—is that her oeuvre, in various ways over the years, courts narrative logic only to undo it.³ And such an operation, in Hoey's hands anyway, is typically understood to repress key aspects of denotation, even while the material essentials themselves are immediately palpable to viewers, literally hidden in plain sight. Something inherent to this hiding has to do with the female sex itself; indeed, the implication is mnemonic: pictures of women are as obtuse as are women themselves.

Such conventional wisdom about the work's frustration of legible arc, it should be said, isn't entirely wrong. In her "narrative" pictures from the 1990s forward (such as those included in the Hirshhorn show), Hoey constructed single images whose compositional elements suggested events arrested just prior to or immediately following psychological or physical climax. In one exemplary picture, a young, bikini-clad woman on the beach is poised mid-stride, a half-second from striking from behind a second girl, who stands uneasily but seemingly unaware. In another, a group of five teenage girls in a quintessential country landscape sit in a loose circle; three of the five look intently at the most confident girl, whose posture bespeaks total social ease; the fifth girl folds into herself, looking down and away. A third image shows a pair of women in their forties laughing stiffly while walking in a grassy field; neither woman looks directly into the camera, nor do they look at one another.

In all of these pictures, there is a logic at work whereby the scenario depicted reveals a dynamic much more than a set of concrete particulars. In a sense, one might argue, the very specificity of these images is made manifest only as an abstraction—something counterintuitive to photography as we commonly consider it. This goes well beyond the observation that these are neither "real" events nor fully "scripted" performances for the camera. Indeed, without discounting the long history of debate around such vicissitudes of fact and fiction, Hoey's work is perhaps more meaningfully approached through a peculiar typological lens. Rather than illustrating—or telling—this story or that, each image in fact appears as a kind of repository for others of its kind. More particularly still, each image represents a form of relationality; this is to say, the people pictured are of-much less significance than the affective tissue binding them together. The real subject of Hoey's pictures, then, is that tissue. Considered this way, one no longer encounters in these photographs the "mysterious" obfuscation found by viewers looking to piece together a cohesive narrative. Relatedly, there is no essentialized code to crack (though there are certainly gendered and feminist implications, to which I will return). One merely—and extraordinarily—is able to see what usually can only be experienced: emotional ties.

Seen in this light, the first image I described—the bikini-clad girl poised to hit another girl—accounts for a certain mode of overt rivalry (between friends, between sisters, between women) that, barbaric in its elements, also tends to pique sexual arousal in its audience (spawning, for instance, B-movies and low-budget porn about women's prisons and sorority-house hazing). The second image presents an inverted social portrait, though one filled with no less ambivalence: a group of adolescents whose common ground is the recognition that to define a clique convincingly, there must always be at least one visible non-member skirting its edge. The third image relates a subtle withdrawal—one we are familiar with in portrayals of women who are understood, in Western society's best-case scenario, to obtain decorum and lose visibility at parallel rates as they age.

These readings point to where the dog-whistle interpretation fails. For if Hoey, in her early works, presented setups in which certain details were withheld, such an effect was, in fact, a means to an end. Not separatist in the sense of imagining a world without men (or even with men playing subservient roles), these images instead hyperbolized dynamics so deeply familiar—if only through cultural osmosis—as to be clichéd in their representational contours. That a man looking at them would imagine himself to find no place within the frame is only the most convenient misinterpretation, and mimics the common misprision that feminism is *about* women, restricted to the realm of women, instead of an overt reaction to ubiquitous, if always shifting, conditions of patriarchy.⁴

II. What She Saw

Social existence, according to Freud, is largely defined by a singular feature. Rather than pursuing and experiencing direct sexual and other pleasure, human beings involved in societies necessarily inhibit at least part of their individual libidos. This inhibition (also called "aim-inhibited love") redirects unmediated desire and prevents individuals from living fully autonomous, narcissistic lives. Indeed, for Freud, it's this deferment of immediate gratification that allows for bonds of all kinds to form, political and religious being the most obvious. In his work on group psychology, the "father of psychoanalysis" allows that a deep ambivalence drives every social structure. Indeed, in order for any bond to develop, every member of a group must necessarily operate against her own interests, putting the needs of the collective ahead of her own. Such a maneuver, however, doesn't necessarily happen consciously or always occur in the spirit of self-sacrifice. Instead, the members of any group—however transient—mutually identify with an object (almighty God, almighty Dollar) and thus, ultimately, with one another. In other words, each member of said group comes to identify her own ego with that of the others in the group, based on a collective—often ideological—object.⁵

During a conversation with Hoey that, in a roundabout way, was about the nature of such collective objects, I admitted that I have sometimes wondered if she is herself cruel. Her work has always seemed to me less posed or staged than choreographed (that is to say, with bodies written into meaning), and while I rarely consider in writing the motives or

intent of an artist, with Hoey's work it's hard to completely avoid. The instructions Hoey gives those who populate her pictures are stark, so minimal as to be barely there. But in asking an introvert to interact with an extrovert, or two type-A personalities to work out their competitive aggression, or someone deeply anxious to act comfortable, Hoey prods already existing configurations into newly clear contours. Here, her task-based directives—bringing out opposition, hostility, and stress—evince the strangest of action types: new, in the sense that they are captured by the camera in the instant of their occurrence, and always already there, evidence of the repertoire of social exchange.

But what good does it do to highlight the kinds of dynamics that promulgate and reinscribe the world as we already know it? If Hoey's work, which has come to explore different modes since the early narrative pictures, still addresses something of the rawness of the social sphere, it also charts alternatives, if never exactly with optimism. If one finds in Hoey's work, a whiff of the *mean*, that is to say that it keeps the word's etymology intact: its earliest definition meant both "low quality" and "held in common" (associations with nasty temperament didn't surface until the nineteenth century). Hoey's image-world is one where certain behaviors and events are indeed *shared*, and such sharing, it seems, gives rise to circumstances that bring out something intrinsic, not just to individual human beings, but to humans as they are literally constituted by their navigations of one another.

But once again, something exceeds this reading. Hoey's are more than illustrations of the bleak shared denominator that undergirds human nature and prods us to rise above via repression and sublimation. In works that look to the hyperbolic and the extreme—portraying grim but "real" phenomena, as in a picture of a woman hunched over the back of her car's trunk, cigarette dangling from her lips, while she casually cooks meth (evidently a trend on the rise with single mothers)—her explorations complicate moral codes and confuse the order of things. In her photographs investigating taboos of waste, gluttony, and greed, Hoey capitalizes on the irony that desire underlies the very sanctions that limit desire's scope. Pregnant smokers, over-spenders, and wasteful hoarders are presented as no more deviant than anyone else carrying on business as usual within their "natural" habitat. Like dioramas of wild animals or "indigenous people" coded as *other*, here the behaviors are given over with near-scientific, yet theatrically imparted, frontality.

But such a description—which risks imparting a kind of anthropological imperative to Hoey's project—still doesn't account for something in the work's composition, which somehow escapes narrative at the same time as it escapes the look and feel of empirical study. That thing—let's call it a supplement—is what generates the dog-whistler's metaphor. But again, it's not any narrative that's difficult to tally (the narrative is merely bait). Rather, what generates a kind of palpable breach in one's ability to comfortably pass judgment in front of these works is that they present what we know, yet suggest otherwise. In a haunting image from 2002, five women kneel over a sixth, who lies on the ground, back arched, in a state that appears to be ecstatic (the other women all wear looks that might be described in religious terms as well—solemn, serene, sanctimonious).

Learning that the picture was inspired by an event then in the news, where such a ritual resulted in a young girl's smothering and death, rekeys the tenor of the picture's affect entirely. Yet it doesn't undo the weird seduction of the scene, nor the intense intimacy produced for the viewer. If anything, those features become more vivid when the abstracted "source" is known and one attempts to reconcile one's own shifted relationship to the picture. As was widely reported at the time, the ten-year-old girl who died during the rebirthing process (this initiated by her adoptive mother, who hoped it would improve their difficult relationship) repeatedly expressed that she was unable to breathe and was dying; but the women trying to help her, to relieve her from what they saw as chronic distress, took the complaint to be metaphorical. Here, as in other of her works, Hoey captures the collision of material bodies with the frameworks that structure their experience. Such a collision is sometimes described as representation.

In different ways, over the last decade, Hoey has experimented with representation as I'm defining it here—not as an image of something, but rather as the distance between our experience of a thing and the thing itself. In 2006, she made a series of photographic collages using original and found pornographic images of middle-aged women. Assembled into kaleidoscope-like forms whose striations act to simultaneously conceal and reveal the very images they comprise, the works result in highly formal deconstructions that are nonetheless conservative (in the sense of keeping something around). Hoey's epic 2008 exhibition, Experiments in Primitive Living, presented a world at once primordial and apocalyptic—and rendered comprehensible via designations that were Biblical in their implications: ash, freeze, thaw, flood, drought. Yet such an over-determined system of categorization is just as much a simple list of environmental shifts that name inevitable, even cyclical changes. These rubrics employed by Hoey serve to surveil, in some forty images, a world that would seem common enough in its details, yet in sum is beyond recognition. Maurice Berger astutely describes the landscape as one that bears the marks of "extreme states of deprivation" resulting in "terror [as] the inevitable psychological response." But with such terror, there is also a tenderness—life-forms (salamanders, people, bugs, fungi, foliage) and useless things (an outmoded camera, a broken radio, a pile of compasses) imbued with a ferocious, unexpected force. Not the end of a story, but a different kind of beginning.

Hoey's most recent works in *The Phantom Sex* perhaps hint at how such a Year Two might be imagined. There are bodies (of people, of things) here, but they appear as relics, or, better, as skins that have been shed or left behind: a woman's torso, incandescent, literally a vessel that was once filled or might be; a wind-filled fabric, still contoured with the weight of the body it no longer holds; a pane of glass holding traces of a lightning's strike. These three pictures are evidence of a kind, and yet they are not so much forensic as they are fantasmatic (that is to say, acknowledging the roles fantasy and desire play in every subject's experience of reality), producing ghosts of events rather than of any living person or thing, past or present. Another kind of Vesuvius, *The Phantom Sex* suggests that

the disaster arrives after we've experienced its effects. But to read the recent work—or the trajectory of Hoey's oeuvre—as an inevitable arc leading to finitude or conclusion would only be to reinscribe the very narrative imperative I have argued throughout this essay should be ignored. Indeed, these are images that seem capable of pointing to events that perhaps can only be missed; which is to say, capable of indexing, for instance, that which is yet to come rather than only that which has already occurred. Introducing a gap between events and our experiences of them (or perhaps foretelling those experiences), Hoey is able here to reset her terms for representation in a way attuned to her feminism—reorienting pictures for their as-yet immeasurable capacities on the horizon of relationality.

Johanna Burton is an art historian and critic based in New York City.

Sigmund Freud, Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego (original 1921). In The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, edited by J. Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), volume 18, pp. 69–144.

² Michael O'Sullivan, "Dana Hoey's Blatant Subtlety," Washington Post, December 1, 2000, p. N62.

³ In 1999, for instance, Vince Aletti wrote (admiringly) of the "holes, red herrings, and dead ends" tripping up any straightforward narrative in Hoey's works. Some ten years later, Roberta Smith found the artist's work too precariously balanced "between mysteriousness and ambiguity bordering on opacity." See Vince Aletti, "Dana Hoey," *Frieze*, November–December 1999, issue 49, pp. 101–102; and Roberta Smith, "Dana Hoey: Experiments in Primitive Living," *New York Times*, January 9, 2009, p. C35.

⁴ A number of feminist theorists have, of late, turned toward investigating alternate familial and convivial structures, though without rejecting many of the basic tenets laid down by psychoanalysis. Indeed, a significant shift—and one that I would argue Hoey herself follows—is to privilege the effects of lateral relationships with siblings and peers over vertical ones (the traditional Oedipal dramas involving parents, most specifically the father). Seen this way, Hoey's scenes themselves re-jigger the emphasis of what we look at, and place something of a new potential within every social interaction. See Juliet Mitchell, Siblings: Sex and Violence (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2004) and Kaja Silverman, Flesh of My Flesh (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009).

⁵ See Sigmund Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, ibid. Of note is that Freud had explored the notion of the "primal hoarde" earlier, in his famous *Totem and Taboo* of 1912–13. Yet where his discussion there (of a group of male "primitives" killing and ingesting their leader) was hyperbolic and mythic, his later work in *Group Psychology* was meant to describe and analyze the structure of social groups as they form, exist, and dissolve. I am choosing to ignore one of the most obvious—and most commented on—points here: Freud's construction of the "primal hoarde" illustrates a heavily patriarchal structure, whereby power is largely wielded through control of women and access to sexual relations with them. While this is obviously pertinent to the topic at hand in this essay, more interesting, I think, is the way that, in Hoey's practice, women are shown to behave not much differently—or, better said, are shown to have the capacity to behave not much differently.

⁶ Maurice Berger, "Silent Spring," in *Dana Hoey: Experiments in Primitive Living* (Maryland: University of Maryland Baltimore County, 2010), p. 9.

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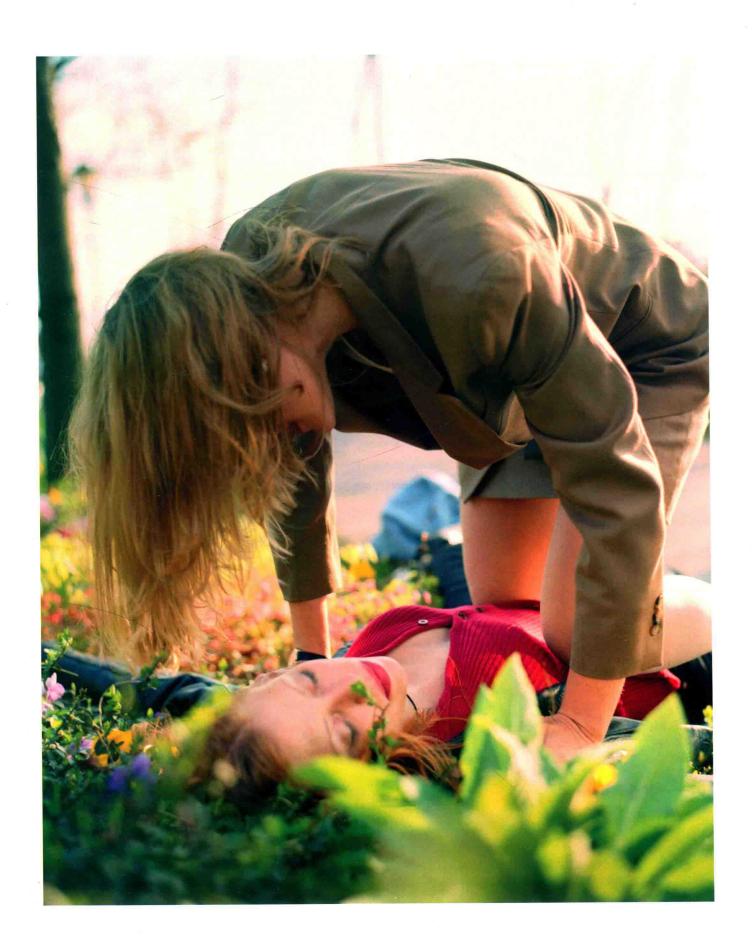
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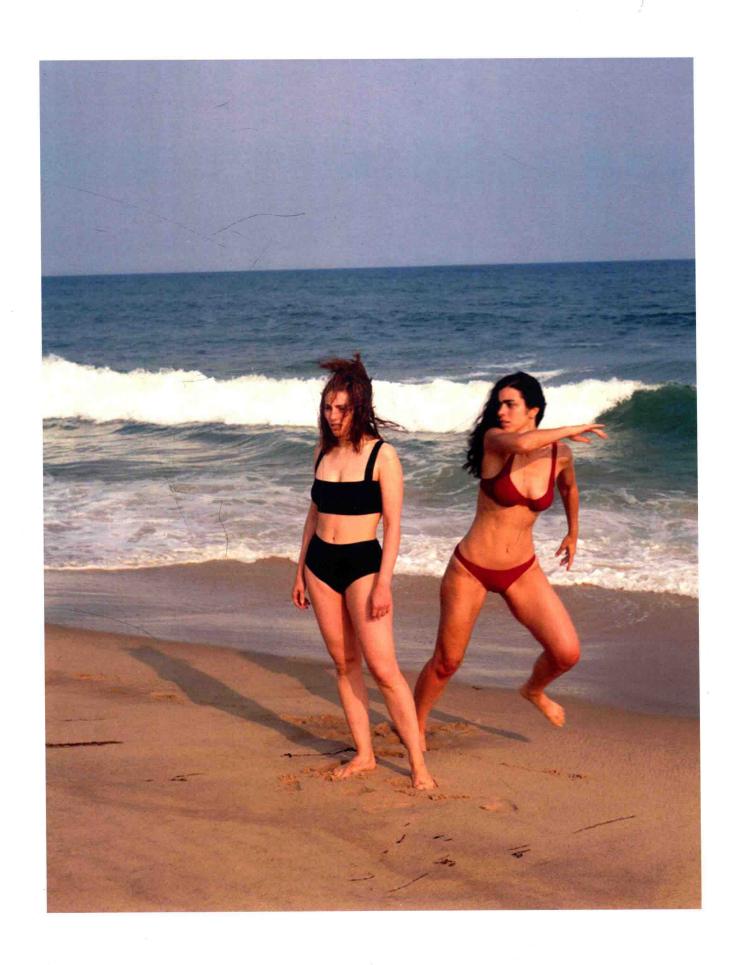
Bibliography

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4. Bikini Brawl, 1995

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