

Jennifer Long, *Doubt*, La Centrale Galerie Powerhouse, Montreal, 20 January-26 February 2006

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Jennifer Long

Doubt

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The nine medium-scale colour photographs of women in this exhibition are akin to a searchlight focused on a troubling affliction of the heart that few today have not experienced at first hand: lover's doubt. The images are powerfully interrogatory, offering an up-close and personal purview of states of love and the associated skepticism that breeds monsters of suspicion and uncertainty in the psyche.

These crisp and deftly cropped images of women are hauntingly confrontational. Whether the faces squarely meet our gaze – or, rather, look straight through us – or the heads are turned away from us, all the images are themselves consummately difficult for us to turn away from. Why? Perhaps because the images together as an installation constitute a highly believable and unsettling portraiture of sorrow, while at the same time invoking thorny philosophical questions about the condition of *amore* and the skepticism that it can stir in the staunchest of human hearts.

Toronto-based artist Jennifer Long has long explored states of selfhood in the women whom she has photographed for many years. In the series of aluminum-mounted chromogenic prints in this exhibition, she is attuned – as she has been in related bodies of work, such as *Bedded* (2001) and *Undressed* (2003) – to tremulous private moments in which a touch can convey far more than words ever could. Her choices of imagery, from the consummately sad expression on a woman's face cropped tight to its contours to a head caught next to an empty pillow, make for unerring eloquence in the sighting – and genuine epiphanies in the seeing.

In the series *Doubt* (2002), Long once again focuses upon and magnifies the psychological tumult associated with love in the women whom she has photographed. Three of the works exhibited feature the faces of individual women lying in bed, with tears in their eyes, but viewed head-on in a vertical format, as though naturalistically posed (the lateral tear from an eye duct is a most surreal punctum here, and more moving, besides); the other photographs are profile close-ups of her subjects' necks resting on pillows. They could, of course, all be interpreted as surrogate self-portraits of Long herself. She demonstrates that love is a remarkably complex term – and doubt, in the context of loving a significant other, more complex still.

Over the last several years, this gifted photographer and curator has cast an intensely personal optic upon intimate relationships. Nothing is wasted, incidental, or trifling in her images, which always steer clear of anything baroque or wilfully histrionic, thus bolstering a prevailing sense of authenticity. Further, the images are cropped in such a way that we achieve an intimacy of regard with the subjects and recognize that they possess, in the midst of their doubt, a wrenching and luminous beauty.

Sartre once famously stated, "Hell is other people." Dostoyevsky wrote, "I ponder the question, 'What is Hell?' I maintain it is the suffering of being unable to love." Many viewers of Long's work might paraphrase Dostoyevsky as "What is Hell? Being in love with someone but unable to suspend disbelief." This experiencing of doubt as to the veracity of the other's love is an interesting emotional no-person's-land. This problematic landscape is seized upon with real finesse by Long, who has a long history of such gripping psychological and emotional investigations to her credit.

Not being sure that the beloved in fact loves one back, and the attendant tumult in one's emotional life, can be rife with sorrow, harrowing – and surely brings the whole phenomenology of love itself to the fore. Doubt of love implies a fissure in the perception of the beloved's total reality – and in the fabric of one's own certainty. Long turns poet Khalil Gibran's declaration (in *The Prophet*) to the effect

that "love sets everyone free" on its proverbial head, for love may also mean, as she shows, punishing imprisonment, at least for the skeptics among us. With no recourse to easy answers, and with a documentary photographer's (or amateur ethnographer's) objectivity, Long particularizes the most equivocal expressions, bodily postures, and minute nuances to convey the emotional consequences of doubt. Often photographing close friends, she cuts to the proverbial chase: the oft-neglected dark side of love – "tearful and compromising," as she puts it. She seeks not to trap her subjects in masques of frozen interpretation, but to touch on the deepest pulse of their sorrow and uncertainty. She undermines the truism that is the idealistic understanding of love, demonstrating that it is really a highly complex and layered phenomenon that can and does wreak havoc in the emotional brain.

Long has said, "As I enter my late twenties, I have become intrigued by the doubt involved with falling and being in love... There seems to be a common faltering, an unspoken hesitation regarding commitment and relationships." She skates the very contemporary thin ice of relationships in search of the truth. But she avers that there are no final truths about love – well, no universal truths, anyway. She captures in her lens the pungent data that her subjects broadcast from their inner worlds, the sadness and doubt that crop up when one questions the veracity of love, the necessity of and for *lachrymae*. These telling integers of the emotional mind confront the viewer from the walls of La Centrale like hungry ghosts sharing a singular infirmity: love-stricken doubt.

Long's eloquent and moving take on the insufficiency of love and subsequent "realm of doubt" has an intuitive truthfulness about it that we equate with rare authenticity. In her ongoing search for dialogue, she has proven herself a worthy student of Mikhail Bakhtin. She makes us, her viewers, dialogical partners and asks that we bring our own experiences to the work and install a personal narrative there.

In this remarkable body of work, Long calls into question the poetic construct of romantic love, showing us images of consummately vulnerable women whose own love stories are impoverished by doubt. She highlights the vulnerability of her subjects by photographing them without clothing, thus highlighting the primordial vulnerability and sociality of the flesh. But this only accentuates the innate nobility of her subjects.

The exhibition is far more than a sequence of discrete photographs. It verges on environmental volume. The longer we linger, the more susceptible we become to the pull of sorrow, the tug of doubt. *Doubt* is intended for and will certainly attract a wide audience, including ordinary folk, photographic historians, psychoanalysts, and philosophers, for its head-on confrontation with doubting Thomasinas has universal appeal.

James D. Campbell

James D. Campbell is a writer on art and an independent curator based in Montreal. He is the author of over a hundred books and catalogues on art and artists.



Untitled 2 (Crying woman with green eyes - Chantelle), 96.5 x 101.5 cm, 2002