Proceedings of the 22nd International Conference on Literature and Psychoanalysis: 57-64

Joyce Tenneson: An aesthetics of aging (*)

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Recall, reader if ever in the mountains a mist has caught you, through which you could not see except as moles do through skin …

Dante, *Comedy*[1]

ARGUMENT: THE RELEASE FROM THE BODILY EGO

Many recent studies on visual culture highlight the representation of the body in photography as a signifier of social constructions. Photography however has always played an important part in the construction of the subject, a perspective that I suggest in what follows, one that combines analytical concepts with aspects of the phenomenology of perception, indispensable for the understanding of art works and of our relation to them.

By contrast with the overexposure of the body in commercial photography, photographers in the art field today represent the body as a visual metaphor for configurations of interiority engaged in subject construction. Their insistence on formal aspects (of composition and technique) displaces the focus from the physical to the psychic body so as to "capture" unstable phenomena of change, of conflict in the subject's relation to time. In Joyce Tenneson's photographs ordinary referents are obliterated to liberate space for other dimensions of the self. Instead of showing "old people", her photographs become carriers of optical distortions, signifiers of self-perception and self-representation. Rather than an instrument more or less adapted to the necessities of life, the body is shown as something concurrently solid, stable, and changing, movable. A paradox epitomized in the phrasing of the philosopher Marc

(*) This paper is an abridged and adapted version of a chapter in an unpublished manuscript devoted to photography, aging, and subject construction, entitled *Touching Surfaces: Photography and the Fabric of the Subject, in Time*.

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[1] This Dante fragment coming from Charles Singleton's prose version of the *Comedy* seems to me evocative of the «misty» visual effect in Tenneson's photographs, and also of her placing the lens of the camera much like a mole through the skin, to look at the human body from an interstice, as it were, between the inside and the outside. The fragment is quoted by James Merrill, who, on the subject of moles, comments: «Those moles, to resume, are just one filament in a web whose circumference is everywhere. They presently mesh with an apostrophe to the imagination, which also sees without using eyes.» (James Merrill, 1986, 89-90).

Richir as: "an inner statue, infinitely labile and moving, ephemeral and changing in its manifestations." (11)

An art photography perspective on aging – connected to time, movement, and change – neither documents nor sentimentalizes but, I would argue, contributes to a creative rethinking of aging. Significantly, I will not approach aging as a state (documented by the photographic image) but as a process of growth (that is, of subject construction, and of shaping, adapting subjectivity to new parameters). In this dynamics of change and becoming rather than a destructive agent, time is conceived of as a formative category and a source of creativity.

How can photography visualize aspects of aging that do not merely correspond in a documentary way to visible realities? How are such complex psychic structures as those related to aging translated into visual patterns? These are the questions underlying my presentation of Tenneson from the perspective of the release of "the bodily ego", inspired from Richard Wollheim's essay with that title[2]. Wollheim looks closer into Freud's striking phrase, to insist that a mental act is not only equated with a bodily state, but *with a process*. In Tenneson's photographs, as I will try to show, released from the "bodily ego", the figure creates the illusion of moving through different space levels, but also through layers of time, internal and cultural (owing to the classical iconography the photographs allude to). The present *captured* in the photograph becomes then not the trace of a moment in time (and of a state associated to it) that will no longer be – according to Roland Barthes's nostalgic approach of photography – but an accumulation of instants situated on different temporal places, a progression of states. In art photography, "the moment that was" (a unique moment in the past, corresponding to a vanishing point in linear perspective) is no longer a reference point. In such photographic works, the present is reconfigured in the choice of the models, the pose, the setting, and in the processing of the image (by the artist, technically, and by the viewer, perceptually). Similarly, the past is reconfigured, not as the reminiscence of something that "was", at a certain point in time, but as a dynamic of varied forms of memory, as a conjunction of mental and actual patterns.

In spite of the classical poses of her models, Tenneson does not show aging as a *moment* in one's life, but as a *process* that could be formalized by what Edouard Glissant calls, in a wider cultural context, "a poetics of relation." The release from the bodily ego – which liberates creative energies – is represented through a series of devices that insist on the dissolution of the figure. However, instead of effacing the traces of time (as they do in commercial photography), these devices explore physical limitations, as well as the creative potential of non-standard bodies. The powerful tactile effect in her photographs suggests internal or imaginative processes and conveys the keen attention with which Tenneson considers the shapes time takes, the patterns it creates.

Joyce Tenneson emerged in the world of art photography in the late 1970s. From her early reflections on images of the self, her photographs opened up in the late 1980s to a wide rage of transformative processes. One of her books is, in fact, entitled *Transformations* (1993). Tenneson's work has been described as ethereal, pensive, disturbing. Her photographs do not relate so much to what we see, as to forms of perception that trigger off inner examination. "To me," she declares, "the larger reality has always been internal reality, those emotions that are not visible to the naked eye" (*Exposures*, n. pag.). Caught in unusual postures or outspokenly posing to the camera, her models partake of a pictorial iconic dimension, which allows her to represent internal realities through apparent immobility. While the pose is classical, the pictorial devices she uses create an impression of movement. This is a paradox that I will analyze in what follows, as an equivalent of the tension between state and process, to underline photography's necessity to stabilize a segment in order to represent a process (the metonymical character of photography has been mostly discussed from the perspective of framing).

[2] Richard Wollheim, «The Bodily Ego», *The Mind and Its Depths*, 64-77.

Tenneson's work has been openly and persistently devoted to various metamorphoses of the body in time, from childhood to old age. Vicki Goldberg sums up her concerns with the perception and representation of physical change as portraying "pregnancy, the heavy flesh of middle age, and emaciated old age with grace, acceptance, affection." (7)

The perspective Tenneson proposes in her photographs relies precisely on the problematic question of beauty, inherent in such transformations of the body. Unlike other contemporary photographers, such as Cindy Sherman, or Duane Michals, whose work figures aging in clear opposition to the standards circulated in the media, Tenneson's photographs radiate an unusual canonic beauty. Working within several kinds of stereotypes – from religious and secular art history models, to clichés of the beauty industry – she creates an aesthetic based on the uncanny perception of visual models that disturbs our habits of seeing. In different ways than documentary photography, her images suggest that art photography can redefine such notions as visibility, the visible, or vision. Accordingly, her incorporation of categories conventionally perceived as "negative" challenges the very aesthetic models she implies[3]. Her association of aging with aesthetics, I will suggest, can be instrumental in understanding how we think of time structures, and integrate corporeal experience to our fables of identity.

1. WHAT WE SEE

Nude figures partially covered by thin transparent cloths, representing men and women of different ages, shown in individual or group compositions. They are placed on painterly backgrounds and mostly devoid of any concrete references. The body is both exposed and concealed through screens of various textures (gauze, veils, drapery). In "Three Women" (1987), for instance, the gauze evokes a shroud, or, organic tissue, placenta. Other photographs feel like mist. To obtain this effect, Tenneson uses devices such as netting, or powdering, special lighting, and a particular printing technique she developed. Mono-tonal, bleached, dusky, her color work plays down the sharp tonal contrasts and glamour of current color photographs to create an illusion of depth.

"Carol and Mirror" (1987), for instance, shows – in profile – a woman of rounded, full shapes and gray hair (details differing from the conventional aesthetics of contemporary nudity). A round mirror in her hand, she is placed against a vaguely painted background that creates a particular depth of field. Her extending arm discretely protects her nudity; so does her long hair covering her back, and the white cloth unfolding down her waist. Her posture reveals modest pride. The painted arch on the background of the photograph – half of which seems to draw a geometric link between her gaze and the mirror – conveys a sense of harmony between the actual image and the image of herself in the mirror that the woman is looking at (one which we do not see and so have to imagine). The older woman is not *made* beautiful. Instead, through this visual dynamic she is brought into an optical field that highlights the "grace, acceptance, affection" pointed out by Goldberg. Affection, I would like to insist, is an essential factor in the aesthetics of aging that I locate in Tennesons's work, but also in that of other contemporary photographers, such as Geneviève Cadieux, Jacqueline Hayden, or Hervé Guibert. For Tenneson, the aesthetic is not an intrinsic quality, but a relational aspect. The "poetics of relation" in her work evolves from the relationship between photographer and model, but also from

[3] Such incorporation of negative aesthetic categories into one's artistic idiom might be associated to what Christopher Bollas calls "genera", the counterpart of "trauma", which can be integrated to the elaboration of one's idiom in creative ways. "Psychic Genera," *Being a Character. Psychoanalysis & Self Experience*, pp. 66-100.

For a more detailed discussion of this aspect in relation to the work of other contemporary photographers, cf. Anca Cristofovici, «Touching Surfaces: Photography, Aging, and an Aesthetics of Change,» in *Figuring Age: Women, Bodies, Generations*, pp. 268-296.

the model's relationship with her or his various age-selves, with that of canons of beauty. With discretion, the pose of the figure in "Carol and Mirror" evokes a body memory of multi-layered past of private and cultural reminiscences, of changing paradigms of beauty.

In some photographs, Tenneson figures the process of aging as a generational continuum. In "Man and Two Women" (1989), for instance, the position of the hands, the drapery, the curving geometry of the composition create a sense of reciprocal holding. In others, such as "Peter Holding William" (1986), or "Old Man and Deanna" (1986) characters of opposite ages represent allegories of growth or epitomize a dialogue between different-age selves (Deanna is actually a model Tenneson has followed in her bodily and emotional progress over time).

Although "captured" on a lyrical mode, there is something disconcerting in the beauty of these non-conventional figures, an impression that we also get from the photographs of young women, which are equally unsettling and for which Tenneson uses the same aesthetic devices. This impression comes, I would advance, from a slight out-of-focus effect in these photographs that does not result from the manipulation of the time exposure, in other words, one that is not a blur. While the body is unmoving, statuesque, movement unfolds from thin fabric or lighting effects. The unease produced by bringing together sensuality with the immobility of the body, suggestive of the tension between Eros and Thanatos, enhances the uncanny connotation of beauty when it is fixed in the photographic image (as, for instance, in "Suzanne", 1986).

FIGURE 1
Carol and Mirror (1987)

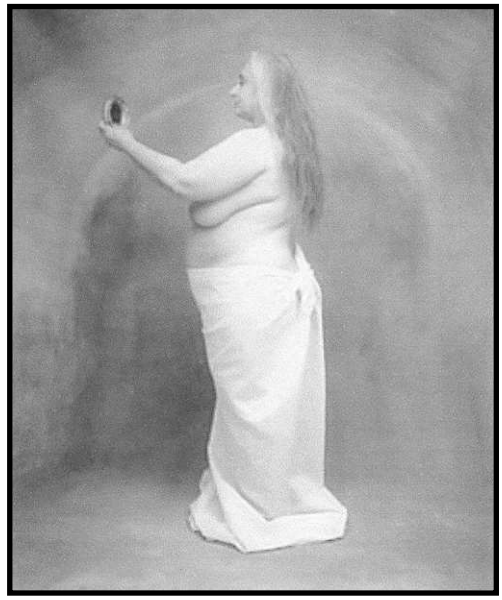
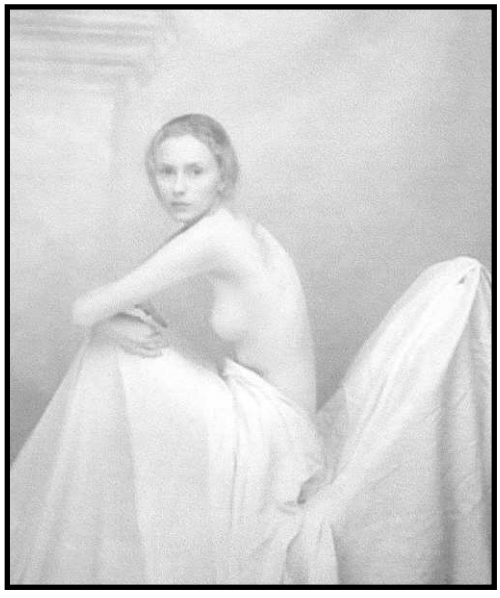


FIGURE 2
Old Man and Deanna (1986)

FIGURE 3
Suzanne (1986)



2. MOVEMENT AND IMMOBILITY: "THE INNER STATUE"

Photography has been related to death in ambivalent ways since its early development and sometimes, in fact, for mere technical reasons. Before double or multiple exposure started being used intentionally to create varied effects, with a few exceptions (spirit photographs among the most illustrious), in the early days of photography, unfocused images were considered a flaw. Resulting from the model's movement during the process of the picture taking (quite a long one at the time), the soft contours, that we find so appealing today, provoked great dissatisfaction, mainly in the case of portraiture. Nineteenth-century photographers were faced with a conundrum concerning the inverse proportion between the speed of exposure and the natural air of the picture. As Geoffrey Batchen notes in his book *Burning with Desire. The Conception of Photography*, some critics objected that the effort to maintain the pose "made the subject's face look like that of a corpse." (208) It seems indeed that the emaciated figures of Julia Margaret Cameron were mostly due to the model's exhaustion from the strain of the pose, their melancholic attitude having been provoked by the length of the exposure. Ironically, a prop was invented at the time to help photographers create more natural effects. This contraption was supporting the models' head to prevent them from moving. Clearly, for a more lifelike effect, the figure had to be frozen. As Batchen justly remarks: "This device transformed the lived time of the body into the stasis of an embalmed effigy. In other words, photography insisted that if one wanted to appear lifelike in a photograph, one first had to act as if dead." (208)

It is a "melancholy truth", in Duane Michals's most appropriate phrase, that in photograph beauty cannot be fixed as an ideal iconic form but only as a momentary state, as the impression of a shape. And that the dazzling sight of beauty is reminiscent in its immobility of the dazzling sight of death. Even while Tenneson's photographs of younger women show the frailty of beauty, they are unsettling in that a pleasing sight of the human figure can be experienced as false or unreal because of excessive perfection. However, her skill consists precisely in displacing the viewer's attention from the surface to interior spaces: stripped off its everyday references, covered with cloth, or seen through foggy screens, the nude body itself becomes a signifier of interiority, enigmatic in its economy of movement. Nudity is for Tenneson "a kind of window on the psyche, the inner self." (*Transformations*, 91) It can be associated, I would suggest, to that "inner statue", evoked by Richir[4], in which all ephemeral perceptions add up, like layers of thin fabric.

A particular tension nourishes Tenneson's photographs. While the allusions to art models or the constructed poses give a statuesque character to the figures, the "dissolving" techniques deconstruct it by degrees. The effects she uses convey a range of affects that integrate conventional and non-conventional forms of beauty into a continuum of subject perception. Round, emaciated, wrinkled, or too smooth bodies become touching precisely because of the dynamics between immobility and movement, between varied emotions associated to the changing body and the images we can have of it.

3. AESTHETICS AND COSMETICS

Tenneson bridges up two opposite senses of "beauty" as well as two versions of photographic aesthetic: that of conventional beauty, with its set of commercial rhetoric, and that of art history canons. However, her figures slightly step out from canons. Despite its apparent transparency, her way

[4] It would be interesting to look closer into the possibility of reconsiedering Winnicott's understanding of the psychological dynamics between the «true self» and «the false selves», with Richir's philosophical (and paradoxical) understanding of the corporeal as «inner statue, infinitely labile and moving». D. W. Winnicott, «Ego Distortion in Terms of True and False Self».

of thinking beauty unveils hidden twists. In the dissolving contours, in the purified setting of her photographs we read a hesitation of the form, as if the ambivalence of beauty opened up the surface of the image like a scar. If she conjures the aesthetic within the area of common place to show "that even lovely women have inner lives" as Goldberg puts it (8), she also reveals what can be repulsive in canonized forms, namely how, fixed into stereotypes, beauty can become a dead form (or, a form of death). Transgressing the boundaries between the two approaches of beauty allows her to explore the transformations of the individual body along with conventional ways of representing it, in time.

It should be mentioned that Tenneson also works for the beauty industry and her commercial work does not, in fact, diverge technically too much from her fine art work. Yet, her commercial work rarely has the "psychological edge" of her art photographs, that strangeness which her clients outspokenly avoid.[5] Ironically, however, her commercial work (commissioned portraiture, fashion, advertising) addresses the "religion" of beauty, which carries the promise, as a *Vogue* ad informs us "to erase time, alter perception, create a new reality"[6] (which is, actually, what her art photographs do). Two modes of understanding the performing self (the cosmetic and the aesthetic) are at work in the two fields, the difference being that between an external and an internal perspective. Where commercial photography shows idealized states in normalized bodies, the pictorial performances in series such as *Exposures* (1986), or *Tranformations* (1993) incorporate various realities of the body as expressions of the becoming self.[7]

4. PERFORMING CORPO-REALITIES

In some of the photographs, Tenneson touches a threshold of photographic representation by making a special use of light. The veils, which she covered her figures with, are turned into bodies of light in her series significantly entitled "Light Writings" (from *Transformations*). Here figures are surrounded by light materialized as thunder, auras, or luminescent globes. Effacing the contours of the figure is another way of releasing the body from a particular state, integrating it into a process represented in the fix image. In transgressing current canons of beauty she directs the gaze elsewhere, not – or not only – inwards, in the sense of deliberately visualizing particular states, but into areas of transition, of processing emotions, of formalizing them.

In this series, light sublimates the body to create new aesthetic configurations at the limit between the figurative and the abstract (as for instance in "Woman in Light Hat", *Illuminations*[8]). In locating light as shapely as possible, Tenneson illuminates graphically the imaginative extensions of our lives. She transforms the battlefield of the destructive effects of light on the skin (one that the cosmetic industry is fiercely contending with) into a creative field in which different textures create intriguing optical realities. Skin is "raw material" in Tenneson's phrasing: "I love when light passes onto

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[5] "Clients want something pleasant and beautiful," she notes, "a little bit unusual but not too strange," and mentions a client "asking nervously before the session: 'Remember, no death or dying, nothing disturbing…'." *Transformations*, 109; 112.

[6] I refer here to an advertisement for the cosmetic product Magic by Perspectives that represents a woman holding a ball of light in her palms. Magic is presented as «an extraordinary new concept that optically transforms the skin». *Vogue UK*, May 2000. A commentary of the rhetoric of this text is beyond the scope of this paper!

[7] It is interesting to note that, unlike her most recent series representing elderly figures, *Wise Women* (2002) and *Amazing Men* (2004), Tenneson's earlier work does make distinctions along gender or age lines. And it is perhaps why, while her cultural argument in the former is significant, the latter's aesthetic argument is more powerful and more convincing.

[8] Tenneson creates this effect by using light as an actual instrument of figuration. A optic fiber laser wand, which she manipulates very much like a flash light during the capturing of the image, allows her to literally «draw with light» (the hat on the woman's head, or a ball in another's hands are actual figures shaped by light).

skin," she notes, "transforming it. The play between, is it skin, is it stone, is it fabric, is it light? – when they meld into each other, fascinates me." (Dunas, 102). Through apparent corporeal dematerialization, Tenneson figures aging as transformation of matter and thus gives momentum to fugitive perceptions of the self.

In the depredations of time (difficult to locate, or to accept) and in the instruments we have devised to escape them – photography among others – Tenneson finds sources of energy. In spite of her elegiac formal approach, rather than resisting or rejecting the alterations of time, she shows her models interacting with them (and with one another). Hence her shifting the illusion of controlling time that commercial photographs are based on, to more creative, generative time patterns. The gauze or mist that covers up the body becomes a trope for skins we shed, for layers of experience we accumulate, which add up in the transformative configurations of the self.

And so, photography is not – I hope to have shown – the record of one state corresponding to one moment in the past (as mythologized by the twentieth-century discourse on visual culture), but a configuration of moments, the record of a process, the performance of the self in the making. The immobility of Tenneson's figures is but a segment stabilized from a continuum. What I retain from her photographs is that while it is important to expose the body as a site of social, cultural, or personal inscriptions, within an aesthetics of the corporeal understood as a larger metaphor for subject construction, the physical appearance "caught" in a photograph can be involved in exploring the possibilities of change. Instead of being a passive medium that records experience, the body is shown as an agent in the processing of experience. This is a powerful argument that we find, under the form of various aesthetic propositions, in the photographic art field of the past three decades.

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