

PHOTOGRAPHY

The Camera and the Flesh

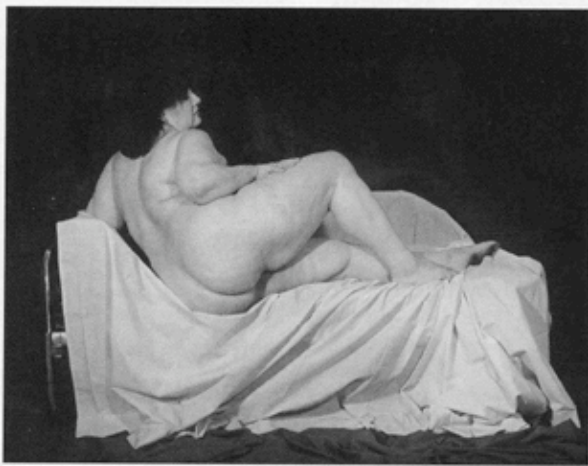
A pair of recent museum shows in France and Spain surveyed the daring, sensual portraits of photographer Ariane Lopez-Huici.

BY BROOKS ADAMS

Ariane Lopez-Huici's portrait photographs have a definite performative aspect. By acts of supreme cajoling, this diminutive photographer gets all kinds of people, big and small, to reveal their radical, often radically unconventional, beauty. In her black-and-white photos, the frequently naked subjects are seen dancing, lounging and, sometimes, coupling in both art-historically redolent poses and states of wild abandon. Themes like exoticism, orientalism and racial mixing that might otherwise degenerate into voyeuristic depictions of the Other or narcissistic depictions of the self are, in her work, deftly deconstructed and reconstituted with feminist brio and French critical savvy. Often the artist seems to impose a kind of mock-anthropological distance between the subject and her lens, but just as often, the photos appear to plunge us deep within the subject's id.

Recently, the photos have taken on a less private, more streetwise edge. On yearly trips to Africa with her husband, Alain Kirili (a French sculptor who often works collaboratively with local artists in Mali and Senegal), she has photographed African men, usually clothed: a spirit man, a birdcatcher wearing a Jacobin-looking cap, gargantuan wrestlers (whose encounters she documents during pre-match). In her midcareer survey, "Ariane Lopez-Huici: Visions of Excess," at the Musée de Grenoble, the affinities between different types of performance—posed tableaux in a bare-bones studio and impromptu moments against a mud-caked wall—made me realize how her photography has remained remarkably consistent, yet pliable and open-ended. (A second survey show, titled simply "Ariane Lopez-Huici," was on view at IVAM in Valencia, Spain.)

Adama and Omar, 2003,
23 1/2 by 19 inches.



Ariane Lopez-Huici: *Asiva*, 1996, 19 by 23 inches. Works this article silver gelatin prints.

The Grenoble show covered Lopez-Huici's photographic work from the early '80s to the present, though it was not presented in chronological order. Included were examples of her best known '90s series, including a nude depiction of a Puerto Rican family ("Deedee and Her Son, Danny," 1997), an oversize naked white Sileas and his lithe female partner in Giambolognese poses suggesting abduction ("Holly and Valeria," 1998), and the pairing of female nudes in tableaux with faintly lesbian overtones—an Asian and a black woman, arms and legs entwined ("Toshiko and Toni," 1998). Absent were her more recent shots of three women in a bonello in Mali (included in the IVAM show), and in general, the representation of her post-2000 work seemed fragmentary.

The artist's biography, detailed in the catalogue, reveals her exposure to an intense visual culture. Born in 1945 of a Chilean Basque father and a mother from the Lorraine, Lopez-Huici grew up in Biarritz. Her great-aunt was Eugenia Huici Errazuriz, a patron of Stravinsky and Picasso in the 1910s, and a much-painted figure of the London and Parisian art worlds. After art school in the '60s in Perugia and Paris, Lopez-Huici embarked in 1970 on a five-year stint as the assistant of Brazilian film director Nelson Pereira dos Santos, the father of Cinema Novo, shuttling back and forth between Paris and Rio. In 1977 she married Kirili, and in 1980 they began to divide their time between New York and Paris. Their loft in Tribeca is often home to world-class jazz concerts (the hands of

pianist Cecil Taylor are the subject of a series by Lopez-Huici, not in this show). In Paris, their tiny 18th-century courtyard house near the Place des Victoires seems to dictate smaller salons. These dramatically different spaces might sum up the divergent aspects of Lopez-Huici's work, which is at once intensely private and vertiginously public.

The feminist edge in her work involves a self-conscious attempt to broaden the canon of beauty—no anorectic mannequins for this artist, but rather austere unfoldings of Rubenesque flesh—which seems to be one of Lopez-Huici's dominant concerns. That's why I might quibble with the subtitle of her survey, "Visions of Excess," a phrase that tends to reinforce the strand of Romantic orientalism in her work. To my mind, it's the surprising instances of beauty, with their moral and physical implication of limits, rather than excess, which rendered this survey so memorable.

It makes sense to see Lopez-Huici's work, in part, as an outgrowth of her involvement with new Brazilian cinema. During her years of working with Pereira dos Santos, she absorbed lighting techniques and improvisation, and the esthetic of avant-garde film (Jonas Mekas and Maya Deren are two cited heroes)—all of which bear upon the ad hoc look of her mature, quasi-cinematic photographs. According to the artist, Cinema Novo was a form of resistance against the rightist military regime, and the movement's dominant figures, Pereira dos Santos and Glauber Rocha, routinely spent a couple of weeks in prison with the release of each new film. Conversely,



Three images from the "Bill Shannon" series, 2000, 23 by 20 inches each.

You feel Lopez-Huici's fascination with the unconventional grace of dancers Bill Shannon and Kenekoubo Ogoire as she attempts to capture the utter conviction of their performances.

these directors, who had been much inspired by the French Nouvelle Vague, were lionized in Paris at the time, and the heat of their best-known movies, such as *Rio 40 Degrees*, *Macunaima* and *How Tasty Was My Little Frenchman*, can still be felt in Lopez-Huici's photos.

The anthropological cast to some of her photographs suggests a link to the tradition of Leni Riefenstahl and Carol Beckwith, who have substantially documented the Nuba people in lavish full-color coffee-table books. Yet none of these characterizations—feminist, cinematic, anthropological—quite defines Lopez-Huici's production. Rather, it's a combination of all these factors, digested through the particular temperament of spare black-and-white photographs, at times teasingly ironic, at others towering and august, that makes Lopez-Huici's work feel both free-flowing and iconic.

In the Grenoble show, the photos were presented as series, anywhere from 3 to 5 shots blown up into large-format framed prints, producing a sensation of movement across and through pictorial space. The serial presentation enhanced the illusion of spontaneity and improvisation. Which is the defining moment for each subject?, we ask ourselves; which is the best print (and which would we choose for reproduction in an art magazine)?; or are these constructs the very kinds of notions Lopez-Huici is trying to break down? (Many of these shots, as well as variants, have been presented uncropped and unframed on other occasions, notably in her scrappy '90s shows at the now-defunct AC Project Room in New York.) Now

framed and enshrined in a museum, they nevertheless summon that more low-key, all-bets-are-off moment of the early and mid-'90s.

One of the best keys to understanding Lopez-Huici's orientation stood literally outside the show. *Toak* (1995) is a 20-minute black-and-white film shown on a single monitor. Made in collaboration with writer and filmmaker Chrystel Egal (who shot the film and edited it with Lopez-Huici), it is a work both classically austere and demanding in the vanguard sense. (It exists in two versions, with and without the improvised accompaniments of jazz musician William Parker; the silent version was shown in Grenoble.) We sat in comfortable armchairs to watch a middle-aged white woman with long dark hair dancing nude in what appears to be a darkened loft space. The lighting is fitful, with a dramatic handheld lamp that often obscures much of the woman's form; the technology is primitive, reminiscent of early Warhol black-and-white films. We see her lunging, making early modern dance moves à la Mary Wigman—crawling, leaning, supporting herself against a metal structure and thereby flexing, making Atlas-like strides. The woman's dance feels brave and primitivistic, endurance-bound—an assertion of strength, frustration, sometimes desperation (though no emotion is facially delineated). To my eye, the choreography doesn't really go anywhere. At times the performer seems almost to be lashed to the metal structure that, the longer we look at it, begins to reveal itself as a sculpture by Alain Kirili. The woman—whose pudendum we see up close in shots that self-consciously recall Courbet's *Origin of the World*—turns out to be none other than Lopez-Huici herself, performing *en pleine forme* in the couple's Tribeca loft. This work—the title decodes as "To A.K." (to Alain Kirili)—emerged in the Grenoble show as Lopez-Huici's strongest bid for high-serious feminist credibility. Made on the occasion of her turning 50, *Toak* shows her physically pushing herself to the limits, and it pays off.

The Grenoble show was installed in a fortified tower, visibly once part of the old city wall, that now houses the museum's Cabinet des Dessins (the museum does not yet have a photography collection).

Access to the show was through a glassed-in overpass from the contemporary wing of the museum. The experience of slowly climbing the ancient tower stairs, and seeing two or three groups of work in small galleries on five levels, was exhilarating, to say the least. By the top floor, while beholding the boldly graphic shots of African wrestlers' glistening black heads, I'd begun to feel nearly as performative as those wrangling subjects. This I don't think was a mere coincidence of installation, but rather a semi-conscious strategy on the artist's part, and also the intention of Guy Tosatto, the museum director and exhibition curator.

In his catalogue essay "Beyond Athens, Outside Eden," Carter Ratcliff cites the artist's fascination with the animism of the Dogon people of Mali, whom she photographs. Three photos from "Kenekoubo Ogoire" (2003), in which the title subject dances barefoot in a dark shift and pants, are charged with manic

Dalila Khatir, 2001, 31½ by 23½ inches.





Three works from the series "Kenekoubo Ogoïre," 2003, 22 by 19 inches each.

energy. The androgynous-looking old man (a master of ceremonies of the Dogon dance) is visibly intoning a song while waving a stick that flies in and out of focus. He jumps off-axis onto one bare foot, then lands on the other. There's a sensation of heat and dust here, and also the voyeuristic thrill of witnessing a performance at once impromptu and ingrained.

Installed in the same room was another trio of images (from 2000), this time portraying Bill Shannon, a.k.a. "Crutchmaster." This celebrated New York hip-hop dancer, who has a degenerative disease of the hips, is photographed by Lopez-Huici in the midst of a solo, propped up en pointe. Looking at these photographs of two very different types of performers you could feel Lopez-Huici's fascination with their unconventional grace and her attempt to capture the utter conviction of their dances.

The subject of the "Aviva" series (1996) is an established professional model, well known to students of life classes in and around New York for her cascading folds of flesh. (In certain dorsal shots of Aviva, not in the Grenoble show, her form recalls the large-buttocked nude bronze sculptures of Gaston Lachaise.) But Lopez-Huici has to date been the only artist who has convinced Aviva to pose for still photographs and captured the model's vampy, all-knowing spirit in tried-and-true odalisque poses.

With "Dalila Khatir" (2001), the female model may seem vaguely familiar to those acquainted with the African-music scene frequented by the artist in Paris, but again it's only Lopez-Huici who has prevailed upon this grandiose yet delicate woman to gesticulate nude for the camera, her impressive head wrapped in a tight turban. (In fact, Khatir is a French singer of Algerian descent who always performs in a costume of many veils, so getting her to pose nude involved transgressing the proscriptions of Islam, a quietly rebellious act for both artist and sitter.) The camera follows Khatir's dance, her smile, her come-hither gestures and her curling toes through a series of five photos. A static shot of her from the back used for the exhibition poster and catalogue cover is cooler and has something of the art-historical charade to it, punning as it does on the precedents of Ingres's and Man Ray's odal-

isques. When printed over-lifesize, the image appears nearly abstract at first; its warmly illuminated central form seems symmetrical except for one fold of flesh on her right side that rhymes with the visible crescent shape of her *profil perdu*. The full expanse of her back suggests a gigantic fruit or pepper, à la Edward Weston, but the textures of her wrapped head, the nubbinness of the striped towel swathing her lower body in a sharp black arc shape, and all the scratchy particularities of the floorboards on which she sits bring the depicted scene back down to earth in the bohemian here and now.

Lopez-Huici's photographs of big women strike me as particularly generous and warm, and most subliminally involved in the idea of indirect self-portraiture. I sense an almost primal desire to return to the womb, or an all-embracing Mother figure in these works. Alternatively, philosopher-critic

Arthur Danto (in a 2001 essay for her show at the Galerie Frank in Paris, reprinted in the IVAM catalogue) has seen the phenomenon of bodily largeness in her work as a metaphor for power, and the ability to preside over one's own empire.

In her photographs of big men, I feel Lopez-Huici reinvestigating abstract sculptural forms as well as Surrealist trance-induced states. Her series "Adama and Omar" (2003) depicts the heads of two confronting African wrestlers. The cropped formats hint at the large scale of the bodies beyond the frames: the black mounds resonate against white grounds, and startling details like a white wristband, a bicep bracelet and a thumb ring really pop graphically, suggesting an Avedonesque still life of body parts. But with Lopez-Huici you don't feel any of Avedon's chilling, dandified stance. Rather, her camera shots seem to take us inside the battle, deep within the men's flesh.

Deedee and Her Son, Danny, 1997, 19 by 23 inches.



Exhibited in the same room, the earlier photos of "Solo Absolu" (1992), which feature lower body shots of a fleshy white man masturbating, bring us up close to the subject's frenetic hand and jiggling, out-of-focus stomach muscles. That this series dates from roughly around the time of the first culture wars, not long after the controversy over the exhibition of Robert Mapplethorpe's sexually explicit photographs, makes Lopez-Huici's "Solo Absolu" seem, in retrospect, like an act of political engagement, an attempt to get involved in the mysteries of the male orgasm (here distinctly unglamorized), at a time when that very subject, and the right to portray it in publicly funded museums, was under attack by the Jesse Helms branch of the U.S. government. (No such controversy attended the Grenoble show, which, at the opening, attracted a lot of hip-looking students; only a polite warning appeared at the entrance to the exhibition.)

For me the most difficult and most rewarding shots in the show were those of a naked white woman thoroughly absorbed in the act of trimming her pubic hair with a pair of nail scissors. "Isabelle" (1995) focuses on the subject's lower torso. We see the glint of her chain bracelet rhyming with the glint of the scissors, the dark bits of hair on the white cloth Lopez-Huici has laid out for her to sit on and the partial views of her face, though it's often obscured by long, tousled hair. Why these three large and slightly blurry photos seem shocking is a real question. Perhaps it's a squeamish reaction to the implication of delicate self-cutting—the possibility of those scissors slipping

and drawing blood; perhaps it's the sense of collusion between artist and model: either way, these photos produce a frisson, and to my mind they are real winners, particularly in the way that they take the fetishistic beyond the realm of the sexual.

The visceral associations suggested by "Isabelle" far outweighed, for me, the reaction elicited by the quartet of explicit photographs of an interracial couple—black man and white woman—having sex in "David and Cecilia" (1995), which hung nearby. These seemed overly self-conscious on Lopez-Huici's part, an attempt to find sensationalistic imagery and to make it resonate with the medium of black-and-white photography. That said, the headless, rear-entry shot exhibited as the first in the group, with its black diagonal male torso soaring above the woman's rounded white buttocks and thigh, has a strong graphic and erotic appeal.

Tosatto, in his catalogue essay, makes the point that for Lopez-Huici, "Beauty is born from this mix of races and colors, the interbreeding of Europe, Africa and Asia." In *David and Cecilia*, such "interbreedings" are pointedly suggested (although the offspring remains in the viewer's head). While in the French context such fixation on the races has strong 19th-century antecedents (note the amazing exhibition of Charles Cordier's Second Empire sculptural studies of different ethnic and national types at the Musée d'Orsay last winter), Lopez-Huici's photos manage to look fresh and quintessentially of their time. Perhaps the last taboo her photographs violate is that of 1990s political correctness (those latter-day *Mandingo* and multiracial lesbian shots felt pretty



Isabelle, 1995, 20 by 16 inches.

risky at the time). In that respect, these brave '90s landmarks may prove seminal for a younger generation of photographers and performers. □

"Ariane Lopez-Huici: Visions of Excess" was on view at the Musée de Grenoble [Mar. 26-May 31, 2004]. It was accompanied by a catalogue with essays by curator Guy Tosatto and Carter Ratcliff. Lopez-Huici's work was also shown at IVAM in Valencia, Spain [Nov. 23, 2004-Jan. 30, 2005]; the catalogue has essays by Edmund White, Arthur Danto and the exhibition curator, Ramon Escrivá, as well as a conversation between the artist and the philosopher Paul Audi.

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