

REVIEW OF MONIKA K. ADLER'S PHOTOGRAPHIC WORK: A PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE



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Specialisations: Traumatology; Psychosis and Schizophrenia;

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Monika K. Adler, *They!*, 2012, silver gelatin print, 40 x 50 cm

I am a fully chartered psychologist and full member of the Division of Clinical Psychology, as well as a Chartered Member and Associate Fellow of the British Psychological Society. I began work as a clinician after qualifying in the Netherlands and UK. My specialisations and interests are outlined above.

Monika K. Adler is a London-based Polish artist/filmmaker. Her work has been shown in exhibitions and film festivals internationally and published in numerous magazines. She is currently working on her debut feature film.

Now to begin this journey through a rather exceptional young woman's still, mainly black and white but not all, photography. Her completed short films to date have already been analysed as will her planned feature film. Having already studied a written essay of the individual, and artist, in question the following familial and biographical facts might best be emphasised before further psychological review of Monika K. Adler's photographic artworks.



Monika K. Adler, *Every thought is a prayer*, 2010, Private Collection

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Monika K. Adler was born in Poland and brought up in a family well acquainted with trauma and death. Her grandmother and other family members were victims of the Holocaust and Soviet Russia's Red Army, therefore Monika K. Adler knew, as a child, who Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin were before iconic religious figures - such as, even Jesus Christ. War stories took the place of magical bedtime tales convivial to peaceful sleep and untroubled dreams. She was no stranger to death, her grandfather passed away followed by her mother who suffered from cancer. The house was converted to sick hospital for her mother. This raising issues so reminiscent of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's post Stalin Cancer Ward. There was also the corpse of a young baby found in a disposal area and the death or murder of the mother, who was run over,

planned by the girl's family in lieu of shame and stigma. The appearance of a stray bitch heralded further distress as the dog atypically killed 10 of her 12 puppies. This will be referred to again a little later.

However before going further, please understand, not only is this young artist quite brilliant and displays highly skilled, well thought through, representations of profound personal issues, notwithstanding the more collective universal conflicts which are globally attuned to current and historical trauma, both in her photography and short films to date - but also, importantly this



Monika K. Adler - *Jeszcze raz przekonałam si, jak ułomne jest działanie wyobra ni*, 2012

young woman is more than likely to become a highly respected innovative figure of international note as well as a highly original impetus, and force, behind modern art form. She has many influencers but certainly no masters or mistresses whose ideas or ideologies she 'serves'.

Adler's work contains remarkable explicit and implicit beauty and truth. Such beauty is also to be found not only in the fragmentation ~ within and between ~ Monika K. Adler's photographs but also in the politics of these fragments.

Herein lies, within the politics between the fragments, it might be posited, part of the enigmatic mystery contained in her artwork, hence such fragments within the photograph can point to some sort of unity, but equally can be understood as all facets and parts of several independent, different, dimensions that just happen to be there within the photographic image themselves finding their only unity in the stream of consciousness captured by Adler's eye.

Ansell Adams (1902-1984), in his concept of abstraction, intimated a similar notion: "The negative is the score, the print is the performance"¹, but also, as Monika K. Adler does so well, photographed just what was there, seen with whatever perception the photographer has. These 'politics of the fragments' not only involve and display an obvious power struggle dynamic but also,



Monika K. Adler, *Eros and Thanatos*, 2012, photograph, collection of Vasil Lebioda

because of an independence between the fragments (once so perceived), a resultant feeling of mysteriousness.

In some of her photographs this apparent nothingness seems to be implicit in her use of shadow, contrast, symmetry/asymmetry, abstraction and so forth. In this way, the 'politics of the fragment', inherent in the photographic representation, undoes the system of representation - and like the unconscious, and the role it plays, might not (appear) to actually stand for anything. At least, that would be the case, for the viewer, or analyst, who is unable to have insight into the concepts this artist depicts - states and emotions of a 'Chinese-like' pictographically calligraphic, or even hieroglyphic nature and language.

Gazing at this artist's photography, from a psychoanalytic perspective, Wilhelm Reich comes to mind. And, notably, his view of sexual politics. His contentions about the political implications of the suppression of sexuality in, for example, patriarchal based monogamous marriage are brought to the fore by this fine art work, albeit paradoxical and seemingly tangential. He stressed the importance of women having control over their own bodies and independence, in economic and psychological perspectives (perhaps worth noting here the possible relationship between a politico-social stance even related to Freud's oedipal myth or, indeed, his theoretical Electra myth)².

For Reich - a male analyst, female sexual receptivity came possibly to represent a meeting of the self and the world in what he referred to as a 'universal love' i.e. in women sexuality is evolutionary - such that mankind would at last rejoin the 'natural' universe. This is also perhaps allied to Malinowski's psychological anthropology.

As with many of Monika K. Adler's photographs, within the metaphor and symbolism there is a psychological perspective emphasising a faithful reflection and denunciation, namely begun by Wilhelm Reich, of so called crucial ideological attitudes: albeit in the obliteration of them - in nature and culture, man/woman and beast, woman/man and cosmos.

He wrote that man and woman will all, eventually, discover their so-called dialectical unity. Possibly we all share in this sentiment in some way or the other. Perhaps fatefully so. Irrespectively, this artist provokes, in her art, meditation on such engagement as well as its critique. The way we live, the way we object to the way we live and peoples religion. Religion as the placebo of the people not necessarily an opiate. Jung also notably posited the integration of the anima and animus as a necessity for the psyche.

Hence cutting across boundaries between consciousness and unconsciousness, or of time, race or culture. Monika K. Adler's work exhibits and offers engagement: embracing anxieties, neurosis or delusions, which themselves can be full of all hidden secrets and/or memories (as in trauma related experiences and memories) of actual history (e.g. in terms of bodily and emotional abuse) in terms of our current state of being, 'the now'. So eventually, with the power of the strength gained from coming through distress and suffering, liberation of the self as individual can be possible.

Perhaps it is of worth now to mention Simone de Beauvoir, existentialist philosopher and author. Noteworthy is her book *The Second Sex* (1939) she posits woman as the supreme 'Other' against which man defines himself as subject, not in reciprocity, which would mean that he



Monika K. Adler, *Through a Glass Darkly*, 2009, photograph

was in fact object for the woman's subject hood but in a psychic act of oppression Woman is the archetype of the oppressed consciousness: the second sex. Her biological characteristics (body) have been exploited so that she can become the receptacle of the alienation all men must feel; she contains man's otherness, and in doing so is denied her own humanity. Animals repeat and maintain; man creates and invents. According to man all that is specific to humanity is contained in man, all that is common to mankind and the animals is concentrated in woman.



Monika K. Adler, *Parade*, 2005, black and white photograph, Private Collection New York

She further proposes that woman is the most universal and absolute specification of alterity. She is a mystery, essence (the soul). No one is born a woman a woman is created from man's needs. The demand that man abandon his right to alienate himself in another, no longer to root his natural being in the woman an act by which he frees himself to explore human existence~ is no light request.

Monika K. Adler's work is certainly of high value, not only in her work but in terms of her dialectic - there resides the subject matter of human history. All the dialectical method has to do is unveil or reveal it-much as Michelangelo said he found his statue waiting in his block of marble - hence 'truth' is unveiled in much the same way, and this sort of 'unveiling' is evident in this female artist's photographic work. It is also what makes Monika K. Adler's perspective and "eye" innovative and unique. Her "phenomenological truth" gets rid of 'artificial' structures. Such artificial structures are found in the roles we play, our status, or within our sex or gender. This is another psychological perspective. But so far gazing at her work all perspectives add up to an excellent artist with much to communicate on many levels. This could also be gathered, even, from Betty Friedan's Freudian mystique. As well as through Eva Frigg's views of Freud's patriarchal attitude. Choice and freedom are highlighted by Monika K. Adler's work.

Monika K. Adler's still photography pays uncanny homage to possible cross cultural facets of the concept of Thanatos described in terms of 'The Death Instinct' by Freud and by no small number of early psychoanalysts. So too, her art speaks clearly and loudly with the resonance of both the universality and individuality of our human psyche involving the phenomenological existential issues of Birth, Love, Dread, Hate, Life, Sex and Death with a powerful depth, not to

mention an individual's demand albeit unconscious or conscious, for authentic meaning. All this her still photographic art displays with a denial, if not 'healthy' refusal, of such labels, or even memories, as a "victim" of events, trauma or 'significant others'. In fact there seems to be a visual statement, within in her photographic language and semiotics together with her chosen representative symbolisation, of an ambivalence and ambiguity notably to our 'life choices'. At the same time there seems to be an allusion to and questioning of something greater than life's coincidence. Choice plays no small part in her evolving style and conceptual subject matter either as sign or signifier (Jacques Lacan).

In so many of Monika K Adler's still photographs the unconscious psyche is attempting to communicate identity (personal and collective) along with most noticeably issues related to the boundary between life and death and the mysteries held within both. Mastery, in her work, is also engaged upon both by the act of repetition.

This continuity of repetitions drive a return to and honouring of the animalistic primal primitive and tribalistic state. Here then there is the, possibly sadistic and revengeful, implied killing and tasty eating of the 'brain' of patriarchy. Also inherent is a sort of magical symbolism of cannibalism with respect to a male lover - perhaps, also through this art medium, seemingly in order to reach past the anchors of imposed experience (and roles) by domineering masculine performance. To gain not only individualistic rights and 'enlightenment' perhaps, but also as a pathway to a total liberation from whatever shackles political, religious, educational, pathological, social, sex/gender and family orientated defined roles towards freer choices and a new life. Seen also, within both a psychological and sociological anthropological perspective.

Embracing the phenomenology of 'the now' is so well highlighted in her still photography it almost suggests that a reappraisal, or even a variable degree of possible negation within a potential lack of emphatic relevance of the undeniably human natural phenomenon of memory as a necessary and sufficient condition towards not only development and growth, but also a transformation (in Jungian terms), a dynamic continuous renewal or "rebirth", of damaged psyche.

Hermeneutic explanation aside, looking at the unmistakable tension and anxiety - in or between - her photographic 'part objects'-as-people or people as- 'part objects'³, her encoded use of contrast between light and shadow leaves a formidable gaze. Notwithstanding the semiotics or symbolisation that represent the ghosts of significant others or past events inherent in her personal identity, childhood development, dissonant confusions and sexualised passions that present themselves now.

The traumatic memories of the artist - undeniably human and natural phenomenon undergo a cathexis by means of the creative process - a sort of healing process in itself. In this too, Monika K. Adler's honesty and depth are very remarkable as is her artwork.

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Notes:

1: Ansell Adams on *Clearing Winter Storm*, 1944, gelatin silver print, Ansell Adams.

2: See: Wilhelm Reich, *The Invasion of Compulsory Sex-Morality*, 1931-35.

3: Melanie Klein.

