DOMESTIC DEFIANCE

Jo Ann Callis: Woman Twirling
J. Paul Getty Museum, The Getty Center
Los Angeles
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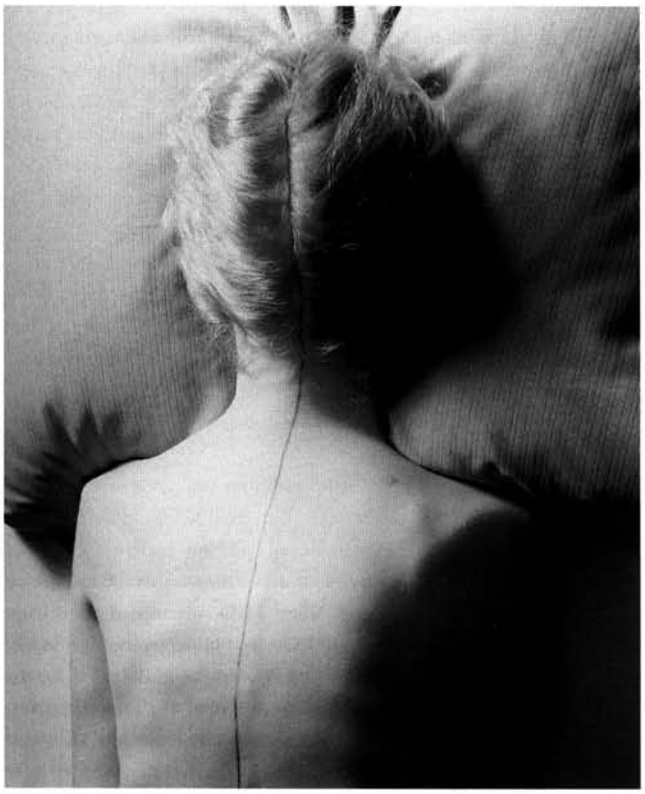
Jo Ann Callis emerged on the Los Angeles photography scene in the mid 1970s, where she gained a reputation as an artist who worked with color photography, making pictures that were suggestive, sensual, and surreal. Schooled at UCLA under the eye of Robert Heinecken, Callis never considered photography as a frame of observed reality. Rather, she fabricated situations to be captured on camera. The trajectory of "Woman Twirling," the title of her recent survey exhibition at the J. Paul Getty Museum, for example, parallels the ups and downs in Callis's personal life. She sees herself as a woman twirling, perhaps spiraling out of control at times, as the title suggests. Yet it is her ability to channel emotional turmoil into evocative images that resonate beyond the particulars of a situation that makes Callis's vision unique.

It is evident that Callis loves color photography, yet throughout her career she has moved back and forth between color and black and white, later adding painting and digital collages to her oeuvre. *Figure under Bedspread* and *Chair and Pillow,* both black-and-white photographs from 1974, reference the confines of domestic space and a sense of isolation, ideas that she continued to explore in later works. For Callis, the setting, a domestic space, is both a prison and playground. The works are less about that space than the impact the walls have on an individual. In almost all of Callis's work on view, a single object or individual performs an action. The pieces ask what happened, what is about to happen, and why.

Callis challenged the stereotype of a contented housewife by making photographs that disrupted the complicity of traditional home life. Influenced by the work of Paul Outerbridge, particularly his carbro prints from the 1930s in which lush skin tones contrasted with patterned backgrounds, she began to rearrange the furniture in her house, painting walls and controlling the lighting to create images. She also drew from surrealism, giving presence to the fantasy worlds in her imagination. Like Outerbridge, she carefully arranged her images, painting with light and ignoring the conventions of a traditional color palette, instead trying to imbue her images with colors that evoked emotional states. The element of control is crucial in these images—very little is left to chance. Callis leaves behind whatever she might be juggling in her personal life at the door in order to direct her own stories.



The exhibition groups the works somewhat chronologically and somewhat thematically, allowing viewers to bounce back and forth between early and later works, comparing and contrasting the use of color with black and white. While the color works stand out, the black-and-white images introduce a more experimental artist. The photographs from 1974 to 1976 are studies of bodies in space, and spaces without bodies. Her interest in the figure as a messenger of hidden emotions is evident in *Woman with Mask* (1974), which depicts a masked, naked adolescent casually leaning against a textured boulder. The work is purposely ambiguous. *Gown in Moonlight* (1976) and *Bed with Glass and Ribbon* (1976) both allude to events that have already taken place, yet never tell the whole story. In the black-and-

Above Left
Woman Twirling (1985) by Jo Ann Callis; courtesy of the Getty Museum
Above Right
Woman with Black Line (1977) by Jo Ann Callis; courtesy of the Getty Museum

white images, Callis keeps a distance from her subjects. In the color photographs that followed, however, she moved in closer, allowing the bodies to stretch beyond the frame. The tight cropping focuses on Callis's interventions. In *Woman with Black Line* (1977), she extends the natural line of parted hair on a female model and allows it to follow the contour of her spine. The anonymous subject buries her head in a pillow face down, but since the photograph was shot from above, it looks like the pillow is balancing on her shoulders. The subtle warm tones of the image suggest a peaceful moment that has been interrupted by the presence of this strange line. Callis toys with things that are subtly uncanny. Another image from this series, *Girl in Shower* (1977), for example, depicts a naked girl from behind positioned flush against a brownish-orange shower wall. She presses her hands into the wall, as if in agony. Her face, in profile, hides her expression. Trickling from below her wet brown hair is what appears to be milk flowing down her back and dispersing as it reaches her legs. Both the setting and cause of this mysterious mess remain untold.

Callis is interested in making connections through the juxtaposition of unrelated objects. In a color piece from 1980, she shoots lizards and roses. In another, depicting string beans and goldfish, she draws comparisons between their contrasting shapes and colors. In *Salt, Pepper, Fire* (1984), a table is set with four items that bear little relation to each other except that they are all related to food: salt and pepper shakers, a cup of black coffee, and a flaming plate. This study of objects led Callis to create a series of black-and-white photographs juxtaposing three unrelated objects, each a unique image, printed together to create a single piece. Organized by shape or by association, these perfectly composed triplets ask the viewer to create meaning by considering possible relationships between them.

Callis treats her male and female subjects similarly. They are usually not identifiable because their faces are obscured. In color photographs from 1984–85, many of the models are out of focus, creating a split between foreground and background, as well as between what is still and what is in motion. In carefully constructed and softly lit interior spaces, she instructs her models to not only pose for the camera, but also to perform an action like spinning, juggling, or push-ups. In *Man and Plant* (1985), the compositional space is succinctly divided by a potted plant that bisects the foreground. The Kertészian composition (Mondrian's Studio) contrasts static elements with a blurry, seated man captured in the middle of an ecstatic laugh. The cause of his emotion isn't revealed by the image's deadpan title. Callis refuses to let us in.

In much of her later work, Callis returns to an investigation of form, and how pattern and color create an emotional space. In her "Domestic Interiors" series from 1995, she pushes these ideas to their maximum potential with small images of dollhouse-sized furniture photographed against lusciously textured and patterned backgrounds, framed by fabric mats. These empty beds and divans are somewhat humorous, yet also imply an emptiness that no amount of color or design can fill. Callis returns to this theme again in digital works from 2005, in which she overlays decorative elements rooted in a specific design period using photographs of domestic interiors taken in the 1940s, '50s, and '60s. These montages are the most distanced and least emotional works in the exhibition. Perhaps this is because Callis uses others' photographs and evoking memories of these empty spaces, rather than creating her own interpretations. In the Getty exhibition, the digital works are presented salon style, interspersed with the brightly colored "Domestic Interiors" and oil on canvas works of chairs and sofas like those of a traditional 1950s home.

While Callis is best known as a photographer, she also makes paintings and sculptures—objects that stand on their own and also appear in her photographs. Throughout her prolific career, she has stayed true to a central theme. Directing models and placing objects in fabricated domestic spaces, she uses color and form to illustrate the emotional and intellectual challenges that confront not only women artists, but all creative people. Callis's works move between this emotional distance and the pure pleasure of creation. What else would drive one to photograph scrumptious cakes against fabric backgrounds, or to mold clay into the shapes of flowers, or wrap drapery around generic objects other than to give them a new vibrancy? While she speaks about her own domestic experience in interviews and in the exhibition catalog as a series of ups and downs that led her to these images, perhaps it could be said that the images have provided comfort and a way to make sense of the fluctuations in life.

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