

## Mariana Mauricio: Unravelling the Pretence

The young Brazilian artist Mariana Mauricio works with photographs - burnt, scratched, cut out, threaded into, they are the theatre in which her anxieties are played, and the trauma of a whole nation revealed. She began working with found photographs towards the end of her degree at Central Saint Martins, gradually moving away from drawings scenes she saw in photographs, to



Mariana Mauricio, *Fork*, 2010  
Giclée print, 47 x 25 cm, Edition of 3

actually working on the surface of the photographs themselves, finally scanning them and re-printing them as giclée prints, in a format larger than the original image.

The end result is highly evocative and emotionally charged: what in the original images is a small scratch, a drip of paint or a cut, in the final image gets magnified and acquires permanence and weight. Photography has always been for her a filter through which reality can be accessed - every photograph carries within it a "pretence", a certain amount of staging and framing which she sets out to unravel, and which she uses as departure point for her own investigations.

She started sourcing photographs from her own *milieu*: the well-to-do bourgeoisie of Rio de Janeiro, who in the 60s and

70s, at a time before her birth, hosted dinner parties and spent time by the pool in leafy, secure suburbs of the city whilst the country was living under dictatorship and people were tortured and disappeared. The tension implicit in this situation is visible in her work, such as *Rock 2 (Pool)*: on a mattress floating on a private, enclosed swimming pool in a rich mansion, a rock is scratched out of the image, as incongruous as a meteorite.

Ironically, whilst the actual photograph is made lighter by removing a part of its surface, the weight of the rock dominates the picture, bringing the issue centre-stage and rendering the segregation provided by the fenced wall useless. As she herself describes it, it is a sort of political critique in a highly personal setting.



Working out of her studio in London, Mariana needs the distance from Brazil to be able to engage with the images, almost physically "peeling" their layers and teasing out implicit tensions, undercurrents and pretences. This can

also be achieved by re-printing old negatives, marked by time and neglect, re-presenting the images under a different light to a new public, in a new context.<sup>1</sup>



**Mariana Mauricio, *Prickly pear (Womanhood)*, 2010, C-type print from found negative 42.5 x 29 cm, Edition of 3**

The little girl in *Prickly pear (Womanhood)* is posing at the corner of a well-tended garden, in a pretty summer dress, holding the leaf of a prickly pear as if it were the hand of an imaginary friend. Upon closer look though, and as suggested by the title of the work, the image reveals itself as sexually charged, and sparks a series of questions: why is the girl standing in this pose? Is it spontaneous, or suggested to her by the person who was taking the picture? What is the relationship between them? And what has become of this girl now - what sort of woman has she transformed into? By re-printing this 70s image

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<sup>1</sup> Cfr. the famous essay by Walter Benjamin, "*The work of art in the age of its mechanical reproducibility*", in *Art in Theory 1900 – 2000*, Blackwell, London, 2003

from a negative stained in orange by the passing of time, the artist invites us to revisit the past and engage with the construction underneath the image, and the complex web of relationships - power, desire, fear - which run through it as an invisible, but nevertheless very powerful force.



Re-engaging with past moments and events is a way for Mariana to make sense of her present, and the present of her country, by working through her own anxieties and the collective trauma of an entire nation. In her work *Guardian*, a child is being led by the hand in an enclosed courtyard. The adult cannot be identified, as outside of the picture frame, and neither can the child, as blue thread is stitched by the artist on his face.

In this image the thread - the Freudian connection with the mother's body<sup>2</sup> - links to someone or something yet again outside of the picture. It is a

connection which does not provide security, on the contrary becoming a tangle that obliterates the child's identity. The sense of enclosure and anxiety is further enhanced by the cuts which follow the grid of the floor tiles.

Where is the child being led to? Who is leading him? He is confined, defaced and silenced. A little girl in the background appears oblivious to what is happening. This powerful image seems to provide a metaphor for a personal experience, as well as the story of an entire nation.

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<sup>2</sup> Cfr. Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Penguin Books, London, 1991