

CHECKLIST

Robert Stivers, American, born 1953

Hand with Open Mouth

1995

Gelatin silver print

Gift of Bart Osman, Class of 1990, Tuck 1996; PH.2004.78.15

Robert Stivers, American, born 1953

Two Seated Figures

1994

Gelatin silver print

Gift of Jamie and Haim Handwerker; PH.2004.79.18

Angele Etoundi Essamba, Cameroonian, born 1962

Noir #64

2001

Gelatin silver print

Purchased through the Alvin and Mary Bert Gutman 1940
Acquisition Fund; PH.2003.30.2

Berni Searle, South African, born 1964

Number two of five from the portfolio Stain

From the *Discoloured* series

2000

Digital print with text

Purchased through the William B. Jaffe and Evelyn F. Jaffe Fund;
PR.2002.9.19

Al Hansen, American, 1927–1995

Homage to the Girl of Our Dreams

1966

Paper collage and wood

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Armand P. Arman; GM.978.203.2

Edouard Boubat, French, 1923–1999

Torse, Paris

Number 3 of 15, from the portfolio *Edouard Boubat*

1980

Gelatin silver print

Gift of Elaine and Gerald D. Levine, Tuck Class of 1963;
PH.998.56.3

Dmitri Baltermants, Russian, 1912–1990

Mannequin's Legs, London, UK

About 1964

Gelatin silver print

Gift of Harley and Stephen C. Osman, Class of 1956, Tuck 1957;
PH.2003.56.273

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HOOD MUSEUM OF ART

Designed by Christina Nadeau, DPMS

Robert Stivers, *Hand with Open Mouth*, 1995. Courtesy of Robert Stivers

BODY (A)PART

Fragmentation of the Female Form

The self is explored as an ongoing process of construction in time and place. The presence and absence of the body in the work points to the idea that one's identity is not static, and constantly in a state of flux.

—Berni Searle



I see the female body, and in the words of Barbara Kruger, I see a battleground. I see a place of political contention, a site of ideological confrontation, a system of socially constructed beliefs. My background in feminist art theory teaches me to be critical of representations of the female form and to question how the body becomes gendered and coded in meaning. Yet simultaneously I look at some of these photographs and I see images of beauty, intimacies of form, and creations of timelessness. How can these two positions exist harmoniously?

The works in this exhibition depict diverse images of the fragmentation of the female body. Through cropping, framing, enlarging, reducing, and abstracting, the artists offer us a fractured view of the body and in the process show us the depth and variety of fragmentation used

for both aesthetic and ideological purposes. For Stivers, fragmentation allows him to expose the haunting beauty of abstracted forms, while Essamba's methods reveal the nuances and intimacy of a racialized body. Searle uses fragmentation to deconstruct notions of race and gender, whereas Hansen uses it to explore the interplay between text and image. While Boubat captures a fleeting moment of rare and unexpected exposure through fragmentation, Baltermants explores the technique to reflect upon the decay, vulnerability, and mortality of the body.

The difficulty in examining the artistic fragmentation of the female body, then, is that there is no one general theory or unified discourse on the subject. Some works of fragmentation are examined as psychosexual manifestations, others as abstractions, yet others as feminist deconstructions. Just as each image represents a piece of the body,

Edouard Boubat, *Torse, Paris*, number 3 of 15, from the portfolio *Edouard Boubat*, 1980. © Edouard Boubat/Rapho

each interpretation merely offers a piece of the image's story. It is our responsibility to place the multiple images in dialogue with one another in an attempt to reintegrate the fragmented parts into their larger historical trajectory, and to recognize the value of the experience in its totality.

In this exhibition, some works deny their engagement with the political; Stivers, for example, never prescribes an ideological agenda to his art. In *Hand with Open Mouth* and *Two Seated Figures*, Stivers explores the shapes, forms, and shadows of the human body, blurred with ambiguity and darkness. Exploring the disorienting swirl of his out-of-focus technique, Stivers creates ghostly images that verge upon psychotic visions, recalling how the fragmentation of female body parts functioned in surrealist productions as sites of mutilated dreams and realities. For Stivers, fragmentation ultimately creates an intimate expression of a hauntingly beautiful body.

Some works, on the other hand, like Edouard Boubat's *Torse, Paris*, appear to be objectifications of the female body. Feminist theorists in the 1970s began to reexamine images of women, challenging accepted representations of the female body and politicizing the role of visibility itself. Predisposed to the Freudian concept of fetishism, in which individual parts of the body become objects of desire, feminists' rewritings posed some critical questions surrounding issues of viewership, ownership, and subjectivity: Can an image be intrinsically *bad*? When do erotic images reinforce or undermine sexist and stereotypical myths? How does a figure become an object of desire? In the case of Boubat, feminist readings would suggest that the image does not stand as a representation of the iconic female nude but rather one that is saturated with sexual desire, fetishism, and objectification. Vulnerable to our gaze, the figure shields her face from identification, yet the viewer prevails through his or her voyeuristic pleasure at the exposed body. On the other hand, however, the viewer is not provided with the privileged knowledge of situational context and is left outside the realm of artist/subject interaction; perhaps the viewer merely intrudes on an intimate striptease in which the figure controls the scene, and Boubat, with her seductive power.

In the last twenty years, postmodernism has brought about a striking prevalence of body fragmentation in art, metaphorically revealing the multiple challenges confronting personal and public identity. Multicultural artists such as South African Berni Searle have begun to challenge the Eurocentric, monolithic, and normative category of the female body. In *Stain*, Searle reappropriates traditional imagery of the nude figure and opens up a dialogue about the interaction between politics, race, and the female body. Searle examines and deconstructs the political, social, and economic ideologies

of apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa and forces us to reexamine body politics in the context of exploitation, prejudice, and oppression. Pairing visuals with text, Searle's dissection of both the physical body and definitions of the word "stain" reflect the fragmentation of culture and society as a result of the apartheid regime. Her work addresses the modern struggle to overcome the disintegrative effects of race and gender—whether social, psychological, physical, or political—that assault individuals and compromise notions of wholeness of identity.

My interest in the body lay originally in how it constructs meanings surrounding identity—how one can become the Other merely through the color of her skin or her gender. By looking at the body in pieces, I had hoped to understand this process more fully. Yet my exploration only became more problematic and complicated as the body, and my perspective, became divided. Why did some artists focus on certain parts of the body, while others might crop them out? How did some artists convey political and social commentary through fragmentation, while others focused purely on the aesthetics of the technique? Does the gender of the artist matter in determining the message and intentionality of the image? And finally, how do we as viewers fit into the picture? What is our role in the fragmenting process? Perhaps, in the end, our role simply begins by posing the questions, and gradually putting the answers together, piece by piece.

—Alexis Ettinger '05
Curatorial Intern

Berni Searle, *Number two of five from the portfolio Stain*, from the *Discoloured* series, 2000. Courtesy of Axis Gallery.

