



Velvet Park
By Patricia Silva 7/27/10

Sculpting Beauty

By **patricia** on July 27th, 2010 | 7:55 am



Iris Kyle, 2003; Bonny Priest, 2004. Images courtesy of Martin Schoeller/Hasted Hunt Kraeutler.

Dena Westerfield, 2007; Lenda Murray, 2003. Images courtesy of Martin Schoeller/Hasted Hunt Kraeutler.



Extremity was inaugurated as a currency of female beauty so long ago, constantly stirring dialogues of body modification. Although the natural body might be momentarily celebrated in a "Real Women Have Curves" campaign, beauty standards cling to extremes: from an eighteen inch waist and altered feet to today's disproportionately augmented breasts and chemically straightened hair.

Extremities are accepted as long as they serve complacent standards of femininity. With Martin Schoeller's portraits of female bodybuilders, currently showing at Hasted Hunt Kraeutler, we see a marginalized definition of womanly beauty as idealized through physical strength.

Schoeller states that for him, female bodybuilders "challenge the boundaries of not only the shifting, maddening, and ruthless standards of the female beauty industry, but of what constitutes (un)natural." While elsewhere in the media landscape, dangerously lithe figures repose in a false sense of health (no fat!), Schoeller's muscular women display their extreme lack of body fat through a fanatical methodology of athleticism. As a series, these portraits magnify contradiction: a deliberately feminine and serene gaze; an aggressive muscular body. But there's a confidence in the women's facial expressions that softens everything.

The bodybuilders are at ease, as self-assured performers before judgment, demanding nothing but an open mind in consideration of their beauty. And if you cannot find beauty, you will at least notice admirable dedication. Although Schoeller has been working on this series since 2003, with significant recognition, there are moments of jaw-dropping awe from gallery visitors. It's the kind of show where viewer reaction is in itself a barometer for social tolerance and conformity, ranging between fascination and repugnance.

The emotional responses I observed left me thinking: the same norms that deem it degrading for a boy to dress like a girl, those very norms frame muscular women as menacing and unsettling. I suppose because culture expects the extreme masculine to either control or abuse power; extreme masculine femininity has no iconic precedent. Are these personal expressions of beauty disorienting because they have no common precedent; or because they cannot easily be categorized as ideals of femininity?

Once again, tension is present when women take decisive control of their bodies. What Schoeller most successfully achieves with this series is by showing masculinity as unhinged from a singular definition (as property exclusive to maleness) and into a pluralistic arena that can be feminized. And that, is one massive step towards dismantling residual sexual segregations. These works overtly show, through heterosexual language, that femininity and masculinity are not inherently trapped in singular, exclusive proprietorship. This series of portraits acknowledges masculinity as construction, but more importantly: masculinity as space women can claim, shape and transform into feminine domain.