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Things Display Themselves by Tom McDonough

Gabriele Beveridge's photographs – or, more precisely, her assemblages constructed on the basis of found photographic advertisements – explore the peculiar pleasures and frustrations of contemporary life within our commodity-world. While her larger-scale sculptures, most often some combination of worn ceiling tile, mannequin parts, chrome display architecture, and a variety of glass balls and costume jewelry, have the look and feel of a faded High Street shop, these more intimate works work a species of alchemy upon the solitary image. Typically they bring together a single-page advertisement – for cosmetics, sunglasses, fashion – drawn from women's magazines of a certain past, say anywhere from the later 1970s through the early 1990s, which may be cropped or shown in full, a frame made by the artist, and a crystalline mineral of some kind, sitting on the frame or encased within it. They possess a singularly strange and enigmatic beauty that draws its energy from what she calls “an internalized image world of the capitalist imaginary.”

Beveridge's work has been seen with increasing frequency over these past five years, mostly in the UK – her home – and Europe, although a stunning exhibition at Elizabeth Dee in Fall 2014 introduced her to New York audiences in a serious way. She studied photography at Falmouth in the mid-2000s, seemingly without particularly embracing the medium as such; she speaks of spending much of her time rummaging through thrift shops looking for old photos to fulfill her assignments. Further study for her MA at the Slade led to her move into three dimensions, but a focus on the photographic image has never left her work, and one still feels the draw of those early hunts through the streets of Falmouth. The solicitations of our advertising-saturated public spaces are at the very heart of her project, “that psychological charge of the street with all the ideologies and expectations broadcast at you to take on as your subject, your self,” as she explains.

But this experience of the image, which begins as compelling encounter, quickly and crucially becomes a source of indifference – the image-as-lure seems to forecast its own disenchantment. On one hand, “there is something talismanic and incredibly secretive” about the photographs casually encountered in shop windows, which lock us in a web of desiring looks, modeling the regard appropriate for the subject of consumption, “how one casts and returns a gaze at once.” But on the other hand these images inevitable disappoint: “and yet they are the most banal thing, as if they also anticipate this skeptical reception.” A skeptical talisman – what better way to characterize the commodity? Beveridge's assemblages mimic the fraudulent satisfaction that defines our experience of consumption, and echo Guy Debord's trenchant observation that “the object that was prestigious in the spectacle becomes vulgar the instant it enters the home of the consumer [. . .]. Too late does it reveal its essential poverty, a poverty derived logically from the misery entailed in its production.” Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that her photographic assemblages transform the skeptical talisman of the commodity into a talismanic skepticism.

In that operation, the minerals – whose obdurate materiality contrasts with the brittle superficiality of the photographs – play a central role. Depending on the work, they might seem like an attempt to charm the image, as in some New Age ritual – see, for example, the line of healing crystals at the bottom of *Gathering Evidence* (3), 2013 – or as stony retorts to their fraudulence, as in *Kritika Reflexionz*, 2013. Of course this does not prevent them from serving more formal, and even humorous, purposes as well, as when a rock crystal serves as a pink brain for the silhouetted figure of *More Subway than Opera*, 2013 – its title borrowed from a line of a 1952 Frank O'Hara poem – or a rough hewn piece of marble completes a profile in *Untitled*, 2013. Perhaps we can detect a hint of André Breton's convulsive beauty in these juxtapositions, his sense of the only “fixed-

explosive” beauty contained in crystal formations, or perhaps of Roger Caillois’s fascination with rocks, stones, meteorites, and crystals as revelations of cosmic time. Beveridge seems almost to echo Caillois’s concerns when she describes how “I like to relate photography and the abilities of the camera to these minerals and rocks – matter that emits fields of energy and natural forces imperceptible to the naked eye,” drawing a connection between “the stillness and frailty of the images, and the feeling that’s inherent in the ‘natural’ elements alongside them; of geological time, and their purely physical hardness.”

One can sense Beveridge’s careful study of artists like Carol Bove and, especially when she moves beyond the individual photo and creates larger multi-part assemblages, Haim Steinbach. But in works such as the stunning *You Look Like Every Invitation To Every Party I Dreamed of That Never Came* – its title also drawn from a poem, this one rather obscure, Byron Howell’s “Body Worship” – *Strange Reality of Your Flesh*, or *Untitled Dream Goal*, all 2013, the results might also recall updated versions of Silvia Kolbowski’s *Model Pleasure* series of the early 1980s. Like the latter, Beveridge too is drawn to, as she puts it, “the way in which things display themselves,” which is, when you think of it, a curiously passive yet entirely accurate way of describing the way commodities present themselves to us. Where Kolbowski’s work drew its power from analytic acuity, however, Beveridge wishes to be more of an alchemist of this world she inhabits, Steinbach seen through the sensibility of a Joseph Cornell. Nothing is settled here, no conclusions drawn: her subjects are precisely “these forms which are on their way to becoming solid. Pre-iconic. This near-dream state” that, she says, is never far from “contemporary experience.”