

Objectifying the Subject: Exploitation, Political Correctness and Ethical Dilemmas

How are street people (the “homeless”) to be represented? This is a question that has provoked arguments among cultural theorists and photography teachers for over 20 years. “Just don’t” seems to be the current solution. Although I understand the pitfalls in making a homeless person the subject or object of a photograph, I am disturbed by the regulatory nature of the invectives against doing so.

Most problematic is the assumption that this segment of the population as a group needs special protection by the art world because they are unable to give informed consent about the use of their image. This condescending and infantilizing attitude reflects its counterpart – indifference toward anything other than the theoretical implications of representation. It has become routine to denounce images made of these men as exploitive, based on a predictable and unexamined political correctness.

This ethical and aesthetic dilemma is the subject of a current project aimed at the production of video documentation and photographs of men I ask to model for me nude. My process is to meet the men and through discussion, determine if they are willing to participate in the project. The compensation is \$100 for spending the day with me, lunch and dinner, new clothing, a massage if they choose to have one, and a hotel room for the night. The hotel room is the location of the shoot. Video documentation takes place through the entire day as well as during the photo shoot.

After the photographs and video documentation of the shoot have been made, the model is interviewed and we discuss his reactions to the experience. The man then signs a release, and is left to spend the night in the hotel. In the morning, I pick him up, pay him in cash, take him to breakfast and drop him off wherever he would like to go.

The project is intended to engage the viewer in questioning notions of exploitation, objectification, class, race and the sexualization of the bodies of men, who I would dare to say, are rarely if ever seen as sexual objects.

I will show the photographic images that were taken during the sessions along with a video that weaves all my subjects together, and in the process, interrogates my motives for doing the project. My presumptions about the men are often embarrassingly revealed and I am as interested in the transparency of my own process as I am in attempting to expose the ludicrous nature of the “politically correct” arguments that circumscribe discussions race, sex, and class.

After the presentation, I hope to engage the audience in a discussion of what they have seen and heard.

SUMMARY

In "Objectifying the Subject: Exploitation, Political (In)Correctness and Ethical Dilemmas," Barbara DeGenevieve produces photographs and video documentation of the process of asking male panhandlers, all

of whom are homeless, to model for her nude. Confronting an ethical dilemma that has been part of a cultural debate about the representation and agency of the disenfranchised, this project is intended to engage questions of exploitation, objectification, and the sexualization of the bodies of a segment of the male population, who we would dare say, are rarely if ever, sexualized. DeGenevieve's own sub rosa presumptions about the men are revealed as she attempts to expose the problematics of the arguments that circumscribe discussions on race, sex, and class.