

BALICE HERTLING

Sam Penn
Bad Behavior
28.09 - 16.10.2024

Balice Hertling is pleased to announce "Bad Behavior", the first solo exhibition by Sam Penn. The show, titled after Mary Gaitskill's 1988 collection of short stories, consists of nine color photographs taken in New York over the past year featuring portraits, landscapes, and closeups of bodies. Drawing on a device Gaitskill uses to reconstruct memory in flashes of connected imagery, Penn arranges the photographs in a psychological sequence depicting the decay of one relationship and the birth of another. In conjunction with the exhibition, Penn's second zine is published by New York Life Gallery, which expands on this sequence with the addition of eleven other photographs.

"I bought a painting from a thrift store in Maine this summer. I buy one every year; bathers by a river, a lighthouse, a sailboat slipping beneath a static expanse of starlit sky... The new one is a portrait of a dark-haired woman in a black dress, a bracelet around her wrist catching bright and golden while her eyes look forever into the self-renewing obsolescence of the future. I knew from our first encounter that I recognized her, that the image held something that was familiar and calm and eternal. I didn't realize until people started remarking on it later how much the subject and I resemble one another. I guess I subconsciously chose this painting because it joins me and this stranger together in some kind of unintentional circuit, the two of us echoing off one another in an avalanche of infinite regression. When I look at her now, I feel both there and here, like I'm in the picture and out of it, the time between us collapsed down into a series of self-replicating loops. If it sounds scary, I don't mean it to; I feel like the artist probably loved her, and it's nice to finally be liberated from the tyranny of chronology.

There is a scene from Hitchcock's *Vertigo* that I think about a lot. It's the one where Madeleine and James visit the Muir Woods and look at the rings on a felled redwood. "Here I was born, and there I died," she says. "It was only a moment for you; you took no notice." The camera fixes on her finger as it traces a thousand years of history, a millennium of births and deaths and wars and lovers suddenly dematerializing into abstraction under the touch of her glove. Moments later when she vanishes into the trees, Hitchcock captures her as something fugitive, a flash of light in a white coat, her tinsel hair shimmering and transparent. Less person and more photographic negative, she becomes a vapor trail that registers absence and longing, a lit-up screen both blank and filled to bursting with evidence of our own fantasies. I like this moment in the film because it reminds me of how powerful images can be, how they can capture both what we want and what we've lost long before we can register any of it ourselves.

I think I'm fixated on doubles because I was a fashion model when I was younger. I have written about it a few times, and I guess I keep returning to it because I still have not found a way to accurately express exactly what the experience meant, either then or now. There are a few pictures of myself that I like to look at from time to time, but mostly they all seem to suggest a hundred different versions of a person who I don't really know, a mutable figure with a kaleidoscopic identity too flimsy and permeable to hold any air. I've learned from looking at them that you can tell from a picture when someone is indifferent to you, when it doesn't matter to the photographer who you are or where you've been. These indifferent images are forgettable, mostly because it's too hard to feel anything in them; I think of them as hollow pictures that echo with something insignificant and impermanent, even to the person who made them.

Part of what I love about Sam's photographs is that she knows that we can always find ourselves in constant things. I think she knows that we like to see who we are reflected back to us, mostly because when we do, it means we are still here. In Sam's pictures, desire is as permanent as the moon and love and heartache and longing, the bodies she documents turned landscape, immovable monuments to the intimacy that happened and is happening and will happen again. I think about my painting and the rings in that tree, about how nice it is for all of us to find ourselves in someone else's past. I think of a picture of a girl smoking in a car, beautiful and unconcerned and forever like all the strangers who smoked in cars before her, and I think about how Sam knew the exact millisecond to map her with a closing aperture. Maybe we love Sam's subjects because Sam herself loves them, because we know how that feels, because there is always something touching about being in two places at once. »

Alissa Bennett

Sam Penn is an artist based in New York. Previous group shows include *OCDChinatown*, New York (2023, 2024); *New York Life Gallery*, New York (2024). Her first zine, *Some Girls*, was published by *New York Life Gallery* in 2023. Her editorial photo work has appeared in *Interview Magazine* and *Document Journal*. Selected commercial clients include *Balenciaga* and *Vaquera*.