



Richard Learoyd

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After Ingres, Learoyd's reclining nude, is viewed from behind, one hand falling like a still life over the edge of her waist, the opposite arm bent with the elegance of Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres' *Odalisque*, to which it is an homage. While a reclining nude is the subject of both the Ingres painting and the Learoyd photograph, each one is distinct to the artist. The face of the Ingres nude is turned to look at the viewer with an expression of complicity in the suggestive acknowledgment of her nudity and all that the luxurious bed she is lying on entails; the Learoyd nude is a study of the contours of the anonymous female form in a meditative light that borders on the consecrated—a still life by any other name. The Learoyd nude becomes a symbol of the figure, as in all painting, beyond the model in his studio posed for exposure in his camera obscura. ^{11, 12}

From the very beginning, the relationship between painting and photography has been a tortured one. Photography's invention in 1839 was concurrent with a shift toward realism in painting, but artists were not predisposed to exploring a new medium that provided a true-to-life image of the actual world; in fact, they grew indignant at the idea that a mechanical



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method of representation could be elevated to the stature of art. In 1862, Ingres was among the artists of his day who denounced photography, signing an official petition in Paris. "Let it keep its place," he said, rejecting any "industrial" techniques in the realm of high art, relegating it to the world of science, where, perhaps, it was less of a threat to his own genius at rendering the world with daunting optical precision in paint.

Sam Wagstaff, among the earliest private collectors of photographs and the man who, for better or worse, was responsible for establishing the art market of photography to begin with, did not always believe photographs rose to the level of art either. "Tell me what a Brahms concerto means, and I will tell you what a painting means," he said as a curator of painting and sculpture at the Wadsworth Atheneum museum in 1961, implying that a photograph is full of facts and a painting is a more inspired thing. "People confuse painting and photography," he insisted. "The beautiful photograph is almost invariably beautiful because of the subject matter. A painting is beautiful because of its form, its texture, its color." (Florence Berkman, "Atheneum Curator Explains: Modern Art: A Visual Language," *Hartford Times*, November 25, 1961).

Richard Learoyd is not the only camera artist—to use an inadequate contemporary locution if only to make a point—to register the expressive and transformative capabilities of photography with such potent resolution. Surely, though, his work renders any discussion about the value of painting versus photography irrelevant. In his images, the "subject" and the "image" are inextricable, of equal weight. For him, it is a matter of a visual construction in which shape, light, color, tone, mood, space, and volume all dance on the surface of a single sheet of paper—nothing less than a perfect alchemy of perception, emotion, and significant form. To say that Learoyd's images can be breathtakingly beautiful does not undermine the larger ideas manifest in the work—the revelation of acute observation and the surprise of captured perception. If anything, their beauty is merely Learoyd's secret weapon.

All quotes from Richard Learoyd are from a conversation between the author and the artist that took place on July 23, 2018.

































