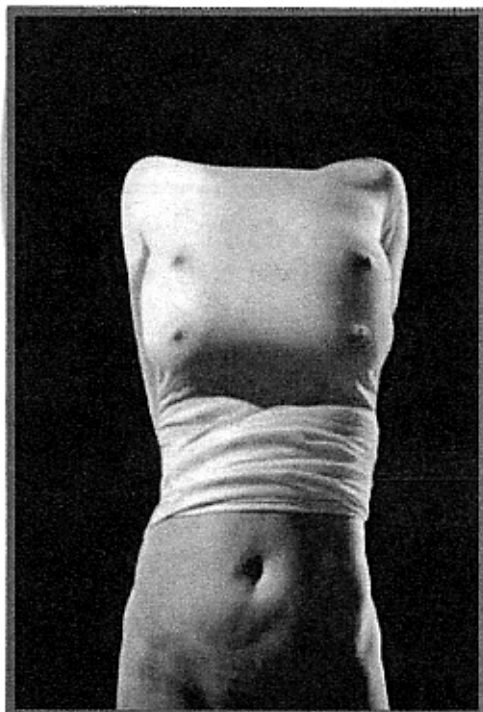


## Naida Osline at Acuna-Hansen Gallery

**I**mages of the human body are mirrors. We look at them and on some level it is always our own body we reflect upon. In paintings, but particularly in photography—a process that requires an originating, real body, we inherently recognize the body presented as kin, as human, as a kind of self. We identify with the representation, pondering the meaning it embodies and “feel out” all the visible differences and similarities between us in an effort to know what it means that we are human.

It is that act of subliminal mirroring that makes Naida Osline's photographic simulations of freakish human bodies in *Variance* series so resonant. These digitally altered human bodies are wildly dis-

Naida Osline, (top) *Untitled (T-shirt)*, 2004, chromogenic print, 27" x 18"; (bottom) *Untitled (Egg)*, 2004, chromogenic print, 16" x 24", at Acuna-Hansen Gallery, Los Angeles.



turbed aberrations. On one level they shock most because the physical bodies they display are not whole or traditionally idealized, yet are often still quite beautiful. The conundrum presented by beauty found in deformed or mutated body is profound: It visually interrogates a long ingrained Western history of thought in which humanity is hierarchically superior, separate and unique from the rest of the natural world.

Osline's images in this series deny that separation. She gives us fragmented, distorted bodies that are like hybrid plants or animals with stomachs that look like segmented tubers, epidermis that sheds like snake skin, appendages that sprawl like roots and reproductive heads that split like chromosomes. The results are suggestive of genetic splicing gone awry. Her mutations are grotesque, unstable bodies that by their sheer visual irrationality and the stunningly beautiful way they are photographed slyly invert art's traditional signs for the transcendent body. Instead they present the human figure as something intrinsically linked to base, mindless nature rather than the rational ordering mind.

The nature-body connection Osline presents often seems to be part carnival freak, part science fiction mutation, all pointedly carnal in appearance. Even the most extreme deformities are glowingly sensuous, with luminous light, lush color and richly detailed textures of skin and hair. In one image (all works in the exhibit are untitled), an elongated female torso in a wet T-shirt is smoothly headless and without arms, but has a second set of well-rounded breasts to complete her as a figure of sexual fantasy. Another chromogenic prints shows a portion of a bent over body completely reduced to a luscious, smooth-skinned fruit of pale, translucent color ribbed with two rippling spines. A third presents a male torso with an excessive array of tight, washboard abs that tuck and fold deeply as if made from the finest textured cloth. Identifying with these distorted bodies we are often as confounded by our reactions of appreciation for their elements of physical beauty as we are by a growing awareness that images of irrational and impossible physical human form can subtly stimulate the voyeur in us all.

Yet, because Osline's images are fictions—composites manipulated by the computer and camera—our sense of transgression in looking closely, even intimately at what resonates as freaky or monstrous in the body is minimal. Like costume or masquerade their technical fakery seems to alter the objectification of the subject and we feel less resistance to indulging our appetite for viewing a monstrous and deformed body.

Theorists have posited that all photographs of the body are

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fetishes of a living body that has been visually captured and inscribed in a permanent state of object as image. But Osline's manipulated photographs that grossly alter the body yet render it appealing offer the pretense to the viewer that that fetish is a purified fantasy released from oppressive objectivity. Perhaps, for that reason, Osline's images tend to suggest a kind of innocence even as they exude potent sexuality or push hard against the bodily boundaries of what we consider to be monstrous or deformed. It's a paradox she takes further by mimicking the visual format of skin magazines and medical texts and presenting her subjects naked, isolated in the photograph and fragmented by a tight cropping that focuses intently on the body's aberration or vulnerability.

Yet, even with these visual associations to other abject and debased bodies, it is often the startling fragility of the mortal body that we dwell on: an upturned tilt to a face without eyes; the grime around the fingernails on the numerous intertwined digits that open like a raw spinal column; skin saturated with the rich but troubling colors of a ripe bruise. As we mentally struggle to identify with Osline's grotesque and disturbed representations, it is these tender vulnerabilities of the flesh and its very mortality that remind us most of our shared humanity.

—Susan Geer

Naida Osline: *Variance* closed February 12 at Acuna-Hansen Gallery, Los Angeles.

Susan Geer is a contributing editor to *Artweek*.