

THE SEDUCTION OF SUFFERING

SUTTON THEODORE

The body was a site for surrealist experiment and a conduit for the transmission of ideas. It became the subject of intense scrutiny: dismembered, fragmented, desecrated, eroticized and eulogized in the pursuit of a range of psychological, sociological and sexual concerns.”

~ Ghislaine Wood, *The Surreal Body: Fetish & Fashion*





In *The Seduction of Suffering*, I explore the unsettling yet pervasive depiction of female corpses in fashion advertising. By placing these figures within abstract landscapes punctuated by oceanic symbols—evoking themes of capturment, consumption, and disposability—I heighten the sensation of ‘convulsive beauty,’ a surrealist paradox where attraction and disturbance coalesce. The large scale of my work disrupts the passive consumption of imagery that sensationalizes violence against women, exposing how the media constructs narratives around femininity, power, and spectacle.

INTRODUCTION

As an adult, I have been particularly drawn to fashion campaigns and photography. The absurd and theatrical qualities of these images captivated my imagination, inviting me into a fantasy of masquerade that I aspired to replicate in my everyday life. A pervasive sense of mystery accompanied these visual narratives, further enhancing their allure and deepening my engagement with them. Over time, these images came to exert a profound influence on my artistic practice, with the poses of the models serving as a recurring point of reference. By continuously appropriating and reinterpreting these gestures within my own drawings, I sought to explore the performative and constructed nature of identity embedded within fashion imagery.

While studying abroad in London, I sought a consistent thread in my work and landed on a recurring duality: beautiful yet grotesque, humorous yet disturbing, seductive yet unsettling. This led me to return to fashion photography but with a more critical eye in order to investigate the infamous, often violent, and voyeuristic campaigns that have long captivated me. I began investigating the photographers—overwhelmingly male—and the dynamics of the gaze embedded in their work.

I questioned what drew me in: the bodies, the narratives, the voyeurism? It was all of it—but ultimately, it was the male gaze. When I viewed similar work by female photographers, the unsettling thrill vanished.

Though I understood the disturbing implications of these images, I remained fascinated. The visual language of these campaigns had begun to shape how I looked, both at women and myself.

At the outset of my research for *The Seduction of Suffering*, I examined the origins of subversive fashion photography by investigating the work of pioneering photographers who laid the groundwork for the genre’s increasingly provocative nature in today’s visual culture. I learned that 20th century fashion photography began to challenge societal norms by pushing the limits of sexual content in their work, and in an effort to capture the attention of consumers, models were depicted in increasingly shocking scenes of sexual acts, violence, and absurdity. The photography of leading figures in the high-fashion industry drew viewers in with cold, unsettling portrayals of sexuality—many of which left the audiences stunned enough to unsubscribe from publications.

By exploring campaigns by major designers and their publishers, and I quickly began to notice a recurring pattern in the visuals I was most drawn to: images that, whether overtly or subtly, exploited the female body. However, as my research progressed, I began to narrow my focus to representations of violence in these images: particularly, the frequent portrayal of female corpses in fashion photography.



MODEL
OR
MANNEQUIN?

“Uncanny doubles are complex machines of introspection. We fetishize them in order to escape a confrontation with our real selves; we project ourselves or our fantasies onto them in order to bypass natural and social limits or real life.”

~Francesco Spampinato

Within my research, I noticed a pattern involving the use of mannequins in fashion photography. Some images were violent, but less graphic than other images. There was something eerie about them that I couldn’t define, so I started looking for vocabulary and context to better understand the emotional response these mannequin images triggered. This led me to turn to surrealist photography, hoping it might offer answers to the mannequin’s mysterious presence.

I discovered that Guy Bourdin (Fig 1.) was inspired by Man Ray, who’s most famous images blended fashion, fine art, and Surrealist concepts through experimental photography that continues to influence contemporary artists today. The surrealists often used mannequins to “explore the liminal space between reality and sub-conscious,” using the architecture of the human body as a powerful symbol within fashion photography for sexual desire, mortality, consumerism, hyperreality, and modernity all enacted through what the surrealists coined “the uncanny.”

“The uncanny,” a key idea in my project, appears again and again in the most significant photographs of this project. Mannequins and life-size dolls have long been strong cultural symbols of the uncanny. What draws me most to mannequins, though, is how they represent the female body—literally turned into an object: “... In the mannequin... the human figure is given over to the commodity form, the very image of capitalist reification... the animate is confused with

the inanimate, a confusion that is uncanny precisely because it evokes the conservatism of the drives the immanence of death in life” (Foster, 1990). Thus, The mannequin becomes the ultimate symbol of objectification, meant to be looked at by consumers or, in this case, voyeurs.

The Surrealists also offer us the concept of “convulsive beauty,” which describes the simultaneous experience of desire and disgust that was often portrayed within their photographic work. “Convulsive beauty” is thus defined as “a surrealist method for presenting the impact that restrictive social mores made on the human psyche through visual and literary depiction of shocking psychological regressions that result in transgressive behaviours.”

This theme shows up often in the work of Steven Klein—like his series “Valley of the Dolls” for Tom Ford or “Suburbia.” These recurring images of sex dolls and fetishism led me to Francesco Spampinato’s *Body Surrogates*, where he writes that mannequins, “Lying between life and death, animated and mechanic, hybrid creatures and creatures to which hubris gave birth... all may be likened to fetishes. And, as fetishes, they give us, for a while, the feeling that a world not ruled by our common laws does exist, a marvelous and uncanny world” (Spampinato, 2016). But this is not just limited to dolls. This also applies to imagery of death.



Fig. 1. Guy Bourdin, Vogue Paris, May 1984.



Fig. 2. Steven Klein, *Valley of the Dolls Image No. 01*, 2005



Fig. 3. Steven Klein, *Suburbia #23*, Bedford, NY 2012.

DEAD
OR
ALIVE?



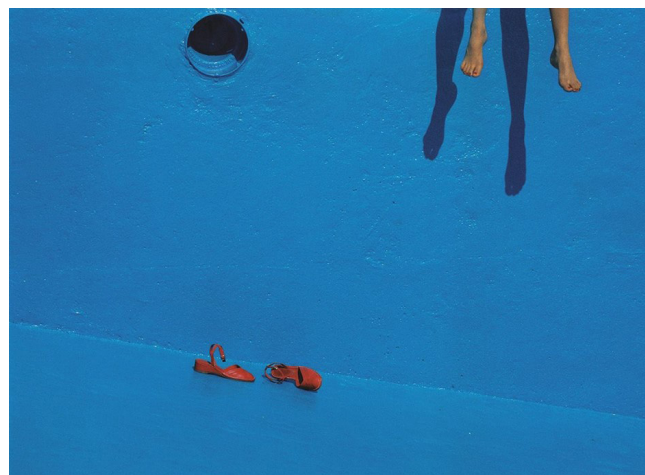
Helmut Newton, Sleepless Nights, 1978.



Steven Miesel, *Water & Oil*, Vogue Italia, 2010.



Helmut Newton, *Sex and Landscapes*, 2004



Guy Bourdin for Charles Jourdan Spring, 1978.

The obsession with the beautiful dead female ha[s] helped to perpetuate a view of women that identifies her with the most passive state occurring, that of the dead."

~Thelma Van Rensburg

Ultimately, it was the theme of dead woman that I encountered the most in my research. What disturbed me most was not just the content, but my instinctual engagement with it: to view these photographs through the same lens of desire, immersion, and glamorization.

Engaging with Susan C. Bryant's *The Beautiful Corpse: Violence Against Women in Fashion Photography*, I was able to contextualize my experience. Bryant critiques the fashion industry's normalization of violent imagery and its broader cultural implications—particularly the internalization of justified violence against women. She writes, "the constant barrage of terrifying images leads to a normalization and acceptance of objectification, which is the first step in justifying the act of violence itself" (Bryant, 2013). This exposure conditions audiences to associate femininity with disposability, a realization that became central to my work. Rensburg's *Uneasy Bodies* furthers Bryant's critique by exploring how women are conditioned to participate in their own objectification. "Women," she writes, "are encouraged to consume in voyeuristic if not vampiristic fashion, the images of other women... Women are therefore spectators of their own consumption, victims of their own objectification." This contradiction is stark: imagery designed for male gratification is marketed toward women, filtered through a phallogentric gaze.

In repeatedly viewing these depictions of violence and death, I've become increasingly aware of how the medium itself—fashion photography—produces a sense of detachment. These women are not perceived as human but as distant, aestheticized objects. Their deaths disturb less, because they are framed not for mourning, but for lusting.

This raises a crucial question: what makes the image of a dead woman so visually seductive, and how does control factor into that appeal? As *Uneasy Bodies* articulates: "The passive reclining woman offers no threat; she is completely malleable, a dummy made of flesh. The object of gratuitous sexual violence and violation, she offers no resistance, but because of this she becomes unreal... As the threat of personality diminishes, her image-like quality transports her beyond the eroticism of the living to the fetishism of the inanimate object. She fits into dominant stereotypes so completely that she ceases to connote any reality apart from the images which constitute her."

Fashion photography itself is inherently linked to death, as the industry's obsession with transformation and impermanence—its persistent preoccupation with the transience of youth and the ephemeral nature of beauty—creates a fertile ground for the joint expression of beauty and death to emerge. There's an inherent mystique that occurs when I view one of the photographs of a beautiful, lifeless supermodel on the floor—her existence is inherently a contradiction in of itself.

As Thelma van Rensburg further notes in *Uneasy Bodies*, the feminine body is rendered "a perfect immaculate aesthetic form... because it is a dead body, solidified into an object of art," illustrating how death becomes a means of idealizing and objectifying femininity, especially because her powerlessness provides audiences with the unique sense of dominance over that is similarly viewed in fashion photography captured by male photographers.

DEATH & SURREALISM

Hal Foster's *Surrealism in the Service of Psychoanalysis: A Reading of the Surreal as the Uncanny* offers a psychoanalytic framework that situates Surrealism within a history of repression and transgression. Central to this is the concept of "convulsive beauty," which describes the simultaneous experience of desire and disgust we experience when we view things, particularly through the methods of Surrealist photography. Defined as "a surrealist method for presenting the impact that restrictive social mores made on the human psyche through visual and literary depiction of shocking psychological regressions that result[ed] in transgressive behaviours" (Hutchison, 2003), "convulsive beauty" illuminates the psychological undercur-

rents that inform much of the imagery I investigate in this project.

Foster further argues that Surrealism is inherently tied to photography, a medium that enables the viewer to symbolically participate in death. He describes the "veiled erotic" as occurring when "the animate is so close to the inanimate," a visual collapse that evokes "a petrified nature in which not only natural form and cultural sign but also life and death become blurred. It is this indistinction that renders the veiled-erotic 'marvelous' i.e. 'uncanny,' for it attests to the dominance of death over life" (Foster, 1990).



Chris Von Wangeheim, *Unpublished Image for Vogue*, AnOther 2015.

THE SEA



(Fig. 4) *Untitled*, Yves Tanguy, 1929.

As I began to consider where I might situate my paintings, I reflected on another element from my childhood. I have grown up in Michigan my entire life, often engaging in aquatic activities during my childhood, though the pool or lake does not equate to the mysticism of the ocean for me. Much of my youth was spent on the beachside with my family, within the hazy memories of the days when we took our vacations repeatedly to mediterranean and tropical climates, though very sparingly now as an adult. I have many memories of my parents playing in the pool with me, of my sister and I getting knocked around by waves, of spending all day on fishing boats and ending the evenings at local seafood restaurants. However, many of my most prominent memories of my childhood do not stem from such fond times — rather, they all tie back to the countless times I nearly drowned, or even me participating in drowning my own sister.

The seascape, as painted in Yves Tanguy's *Untitled* (Fig. 4.), an eerie yet fantastical backdrop for the myriad of forms placed in the foreground, was one of the first Surrealist artworks that I encountered that ties back to my projects themes surrounding the unconscious mind, mortality, and sexuality. At a distance,

the viewer understands that they're viewing a beach, but upon closer inspection, they are forced into a state of confusion, unable to comprehend what any of the objects represent — the only distinguishable subject within the landscape is the foliage of what appears to be a palm tree, just barley giving the viewer enough context to grasp the scene.

This “marvelousness” we encounter - the confusion between animate and inanimate - is extensively explored within Christina Heflin's *Submerged Surrealism*, which she states that “depictions of the marine... question the regimes of ocularcentrism, gender roles and anthropocentrism.” Her text aided me in my search to make a connection between my fascination with the ocean and fashion photography – particularly the emphasis on the act of looking. Moreover, the ocean as a subject of scrutiny allowed me to investigate my own personal connections with the sea and its ties to unconscious thought. This strange introspection into my childhood ties into my Surrealist theory as “indeed, in ‘convulsive beauty,’ as in trauma, there is a confusion between internal and external impulses in which compulsions in the unconscious are read as convulsions in the world” (Foster, 1990).



UNTITLED

Though ultimately excluded from the final exhibition, these paintings were foundational in shaping the conceptual and visual strategies that informed my later works.

These works marked my shift to a subtractive painting process: beginning with two colors, I wiped away highlights and glazed over the monochrome base, slowly building depth through translucent layers. This method became my default technique across the rest of the series.

To integrate the canvases more cohesively into the series, I added floating symbols—fishing tools in

one, dead sea creatures in another—contained within translucent boxes. This gesture draws from surrealist photomontage and suggests that the mannequins are not just props, but metaphors: for mortality, for commodified womanhood, for fetishism.



SOUS VIDE

The final body of work combined all the theory and imagery I had observed over the past five months. Moving forward, these are the works from the show, with a few descriptions to show how these ideas about come through.

The composition anchors itself around a body and a symbol. Throughout the making of this piece, I stayed with an additive approach, layering slowly, though this painting resisted me at every turn. This contrast between death and life, land and sea, dimension and flatness, remained at the core of my creative pursuit throughout the semester. As I continued to address the themes within my research, I further experimented

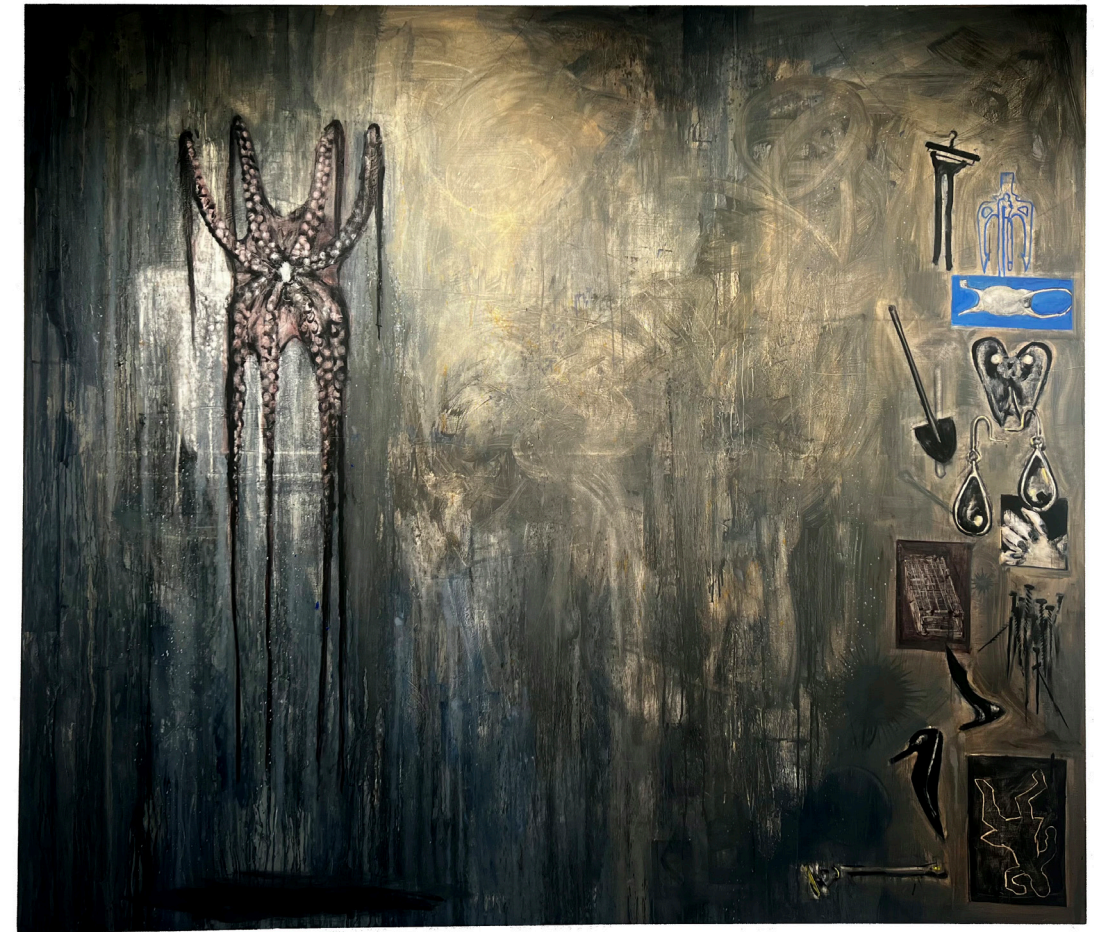
with the materiality of the paint itself to accentuate the haunting nature of my work.



NEGATIVE CAPABILITY

On the left, a sequence of repeating images recalls the form of a negative film strip. Whether the body depicted is dead or alive remains uncertain; the viewer is denied sufficient information to reach a conclusion. What is clear is that we observe from the outside, looking inward.

Positioned at the highest point of the wall, the old man oversees the composition, establishing a visual hierarchy. His gaze transforms the work into a narrative: he becomes the protagonist, the voyeur who implicates the viewer in the act of looking. The panels extend his perspective, reinforcing that it is only the photographer—and by extension, the witness—who holds the privilege of sight.



CIRCUMSTANCIAL EVIDENCE

The final painting in *The Seduction of Suffering* takes the abstraction of my research to its extreme, subtly suggesting the human form while deliberately withholding any direct depiction of the female body. The only clear reference is the chalk outline of a woman positioned in the bottom right corner. The octopus, now the dominant element in the composition, draws attention to the rest of the painting. The emptiness within the canvas warrants further examination, as the symbols become submerged within the abstraction of the background. It is left to the viewer to engage more closely, uncovering what exists beyond the foremost layers of paint.

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CONCLUSION

Throughout this project, I have recognized just how easily fashion photography itself creates a sense of detachment. These women are rendered so aesthetically and emotionally distant that they no longer appear fully human. Their deaths do not disturb, in part because they are framed through a visual language meant to tantalize the viewer. In engaging with this imagery, I momentarily experience a world that remains inaccessible to me just like those of the mannequins—a world in which I hold the ability to participate as a man through my gaze alone.

Having never pursued any project at a scale like this, much of this piece was an intense learning experience—research versus planning—concepts, imagery, execution, but still intuition. The precision of ideas, the focused inquiry, thus created an open space for intuitive painting. *The Seduction of Suffering* has established an invaluable foundation for the continued integration of both formal and visual influences into my artistic practice in the years ahead.