

# SEAN KELLY

Kley, Elizabeth. "Slater Bradley: Perfect Empathy," *Eyemazing*, Summer 2009.

**EYEMAZING**

## Slater Bradley

### Perfect Empathy

Slater Bradley's *Perfect Empathy*, a series of hand-altered photographs of nude women with backgrounds partially covered by gold or silver marker, is now on view in *Nothing Changes How it Used to Be*, an exhibition at the Frans Hals Museum in Haarlem. The show also includes Bradley's curated selection of female images by Gerard Petrus Fieret, the eccentric Dutch photographer who died on January 24.

At 34, San Francisco born, New York based Bradley has already had solo exhibitions at venues all over the world, including New York's Guggenheim Museum of Art, The Contemporary Art Museum in St. Louis, Bard College Center for Curatorial Studies, and galleries in New York, Los Angeles, London, Berlin, Madrid and Tokyo. Bradley's videos and photographs address profound concerns of existence and experience, through multiple layers of artifice.

His best-known works include *The Doppelgänger Trilogy* (2001-4), pseudo-pirated footage of performances by Ian Curtis, Kurt Cobain, and Michael Jackson. Ben Brock, a talented actor resembling Bradley who serves as his doppelgänger, muse and stand-in, plays all the roles; two celebrities who committed suicide, and one world-famous recluse who seems determined to turn himself into an artificial cyborg. Carefully manufactured to resemble home movies, made before youtube became ubiquitous, these fake documentaries provide fabricated glimpses of idolised artists that are ultimately charades, although the desires and emotions they evoke are piercingly real for thousands of fans.

Youth's transience and the universe's vast impersonality have also been important themes. In *Theory and Observation* (2002), a video included in the 2004 Whitney Biennial, secretly filmed close-ups of a children's choir in Notre Dame are accompanied by a synthesised voice, purporting to be the paralysed scientist Stephen Hawking, discoursing on big bang theory

and the Pope's rejection of scientific investigation. And in *Dark Night of the Soul* (2005-6), the space suit clad doppelgänger walks through the different galleries of New York's Museum of Natural History, exploring false representations of earth and outer space, like an astronaut lost in a desolate landscape, trying to regain his equilibrium in a place without space or time.

Young women projecting strength through vulnerability can be seen in other works, their quivering vitality frequently contrasted with images evoking death. *JFK Jr* (2000) is a voyeuristic study of a girl adding flowers to the pile in front of the celebrity's apartment building after his death (feeling genuine regret at the loss of man she never knew), and *My Conclusion My Necessity* (2005) documents a beautiful Danish teenager happily following the fashion of adding her lip print to the layers of red kisses on Oscar Wilde's tomb in Paris's Pere Lachaise cemetery—with no conception of Wilde's identity. Both subjects are strangers Bradley met by chance while exploring the locations of the videos.

In *Perfect Empathy*, the series of still images of female nudes illustrated here, large metallic areas isolate young women's candid stares and blooming flesh. These gold and silver spaces are impervious, eternal and otherworldly, and the eerie contrast between Bradley's uniform marker strokes and the model's soft bodies makes the women seem even more vulnerable. In addition, Bradley's use of a faux metal marker to evoke an icon's precious background is another collision between the ersatz and the spiritual. *Eyemazing* was delighted to talk to Bradley at his studio in Dumbo, New York about the photographs now on exhibit in the Netherlands.

**Elizabeth Kley:** This is a bit of a departure from your earlier work. You've always made photographs, but they are most often created in relation to your videos.

**Slater Bradley:** In photography, you need to create narrow blinders to see the world. The fact that you can take a picture of anything is really disturbing. You can almost lose your life because you're behind a camera all the time. As a photographer in high school, I felt I was always on the outside looking in, unable to socialise with people. When I got to college I started making videos because I felt the sacrifice of my life was less. It was more about a small moment in a larger event that you can capture, manipulate and turn into a story, rather than one large narrative told over thousands of photographs.

But photography was my first love. I began this series in March 2007, with one photograph of my girlfriend Julia. Due to an overwhelmingly positive response to that single image, I decided to make more with other women. At the time, I felt that a cycle had ended in my work, and I wanted to begin a new one. Since I'm working on a series with concrete parameters, photography no longer seems so overwhelming, and I've always wanted to do nudes. I'm interested in the tension in images of the unclothed female body, and in the idea of reinvestigating a classical theme to discover how it would fit into my larger body of work. I wanted to challenge myself to concentrate on female iconicism rather than the questing male that has so often been my subject. I also wanted to stop playing chess with the audience. My work has always had multiple layers of meaning that needed to be decoded, and the audience can immediately respond to a nude. I wanted to get back to a fertile state, to bare it all, so to speak. The starting point was simplicity. There is no joke on the audience, no search for meaning. What you see is what you get.

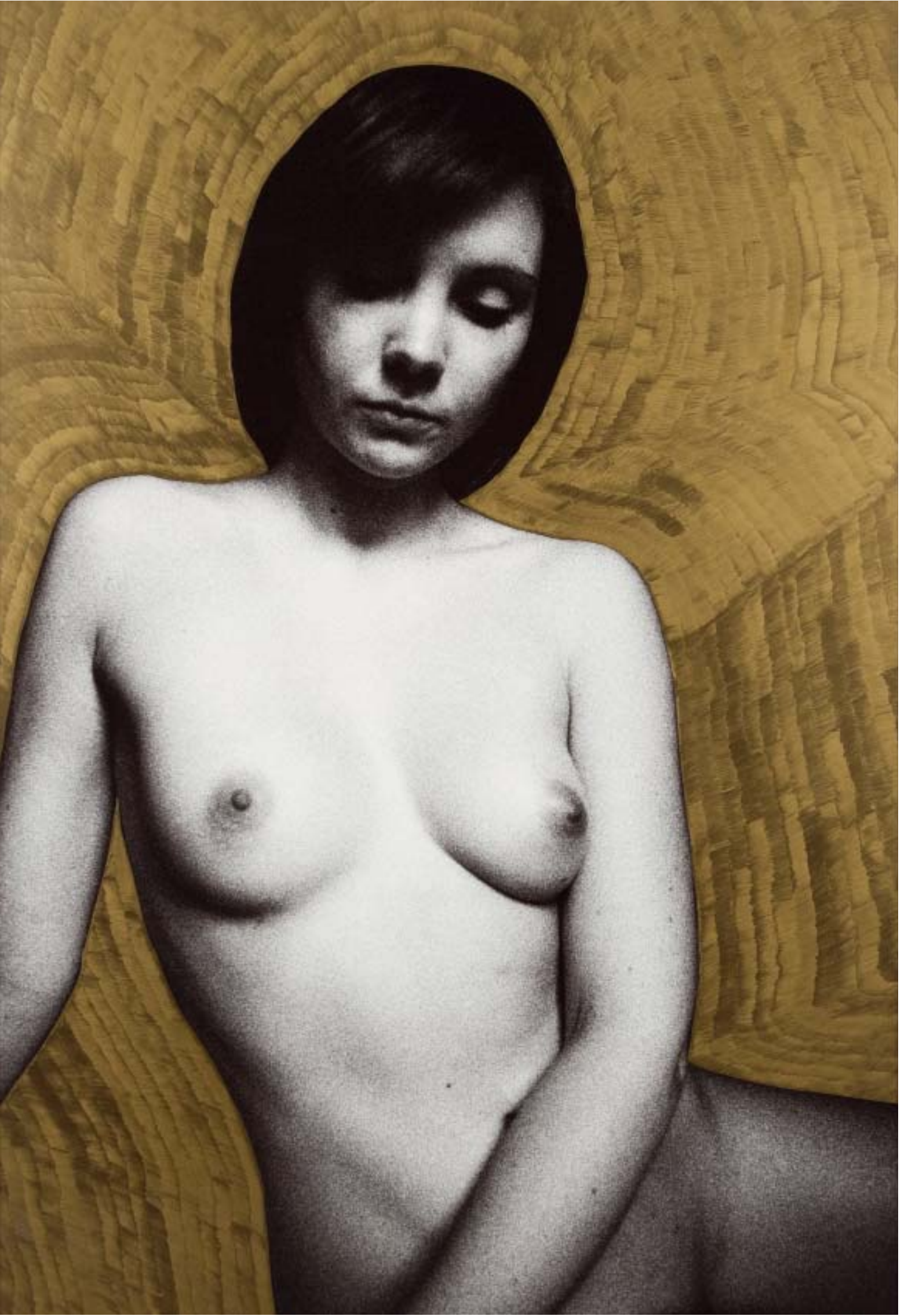
This body of work also grew out of the shifting state of the art market today. The pace of art's perception is accelerating, and the dialogue of artist, gallery, and audience has become a conversation between artist, art dealer, art fair and audience. No one will sit still to

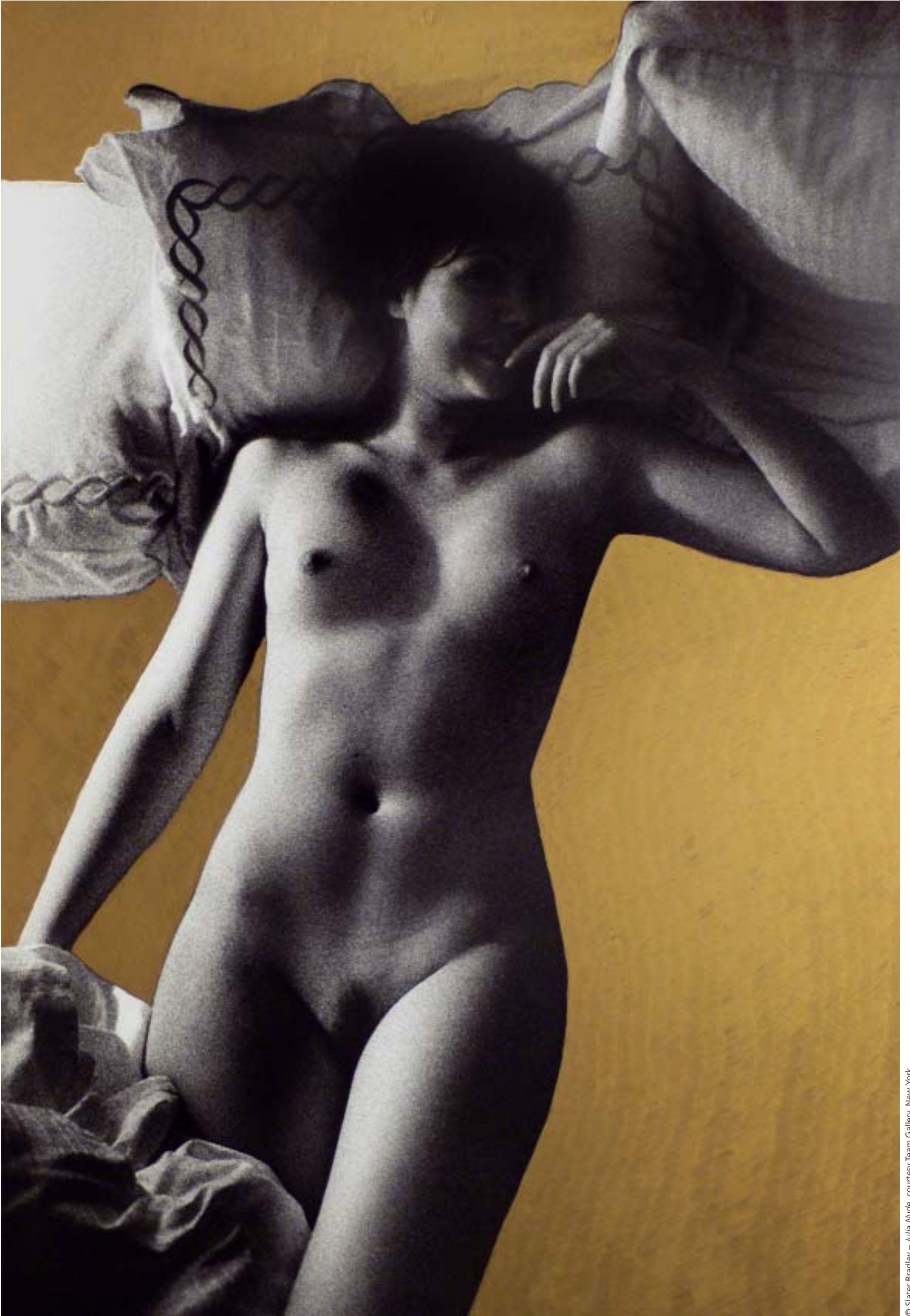


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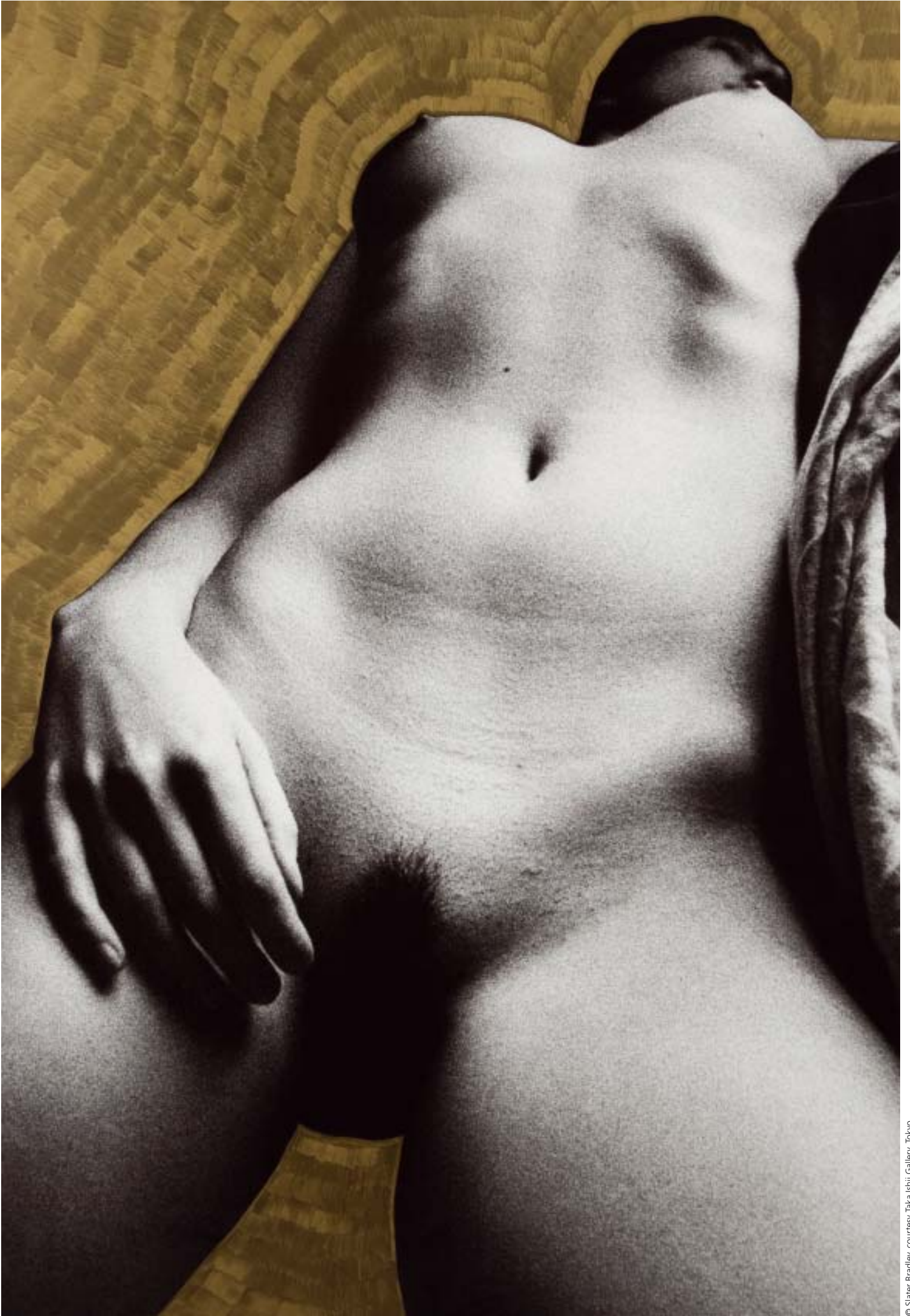


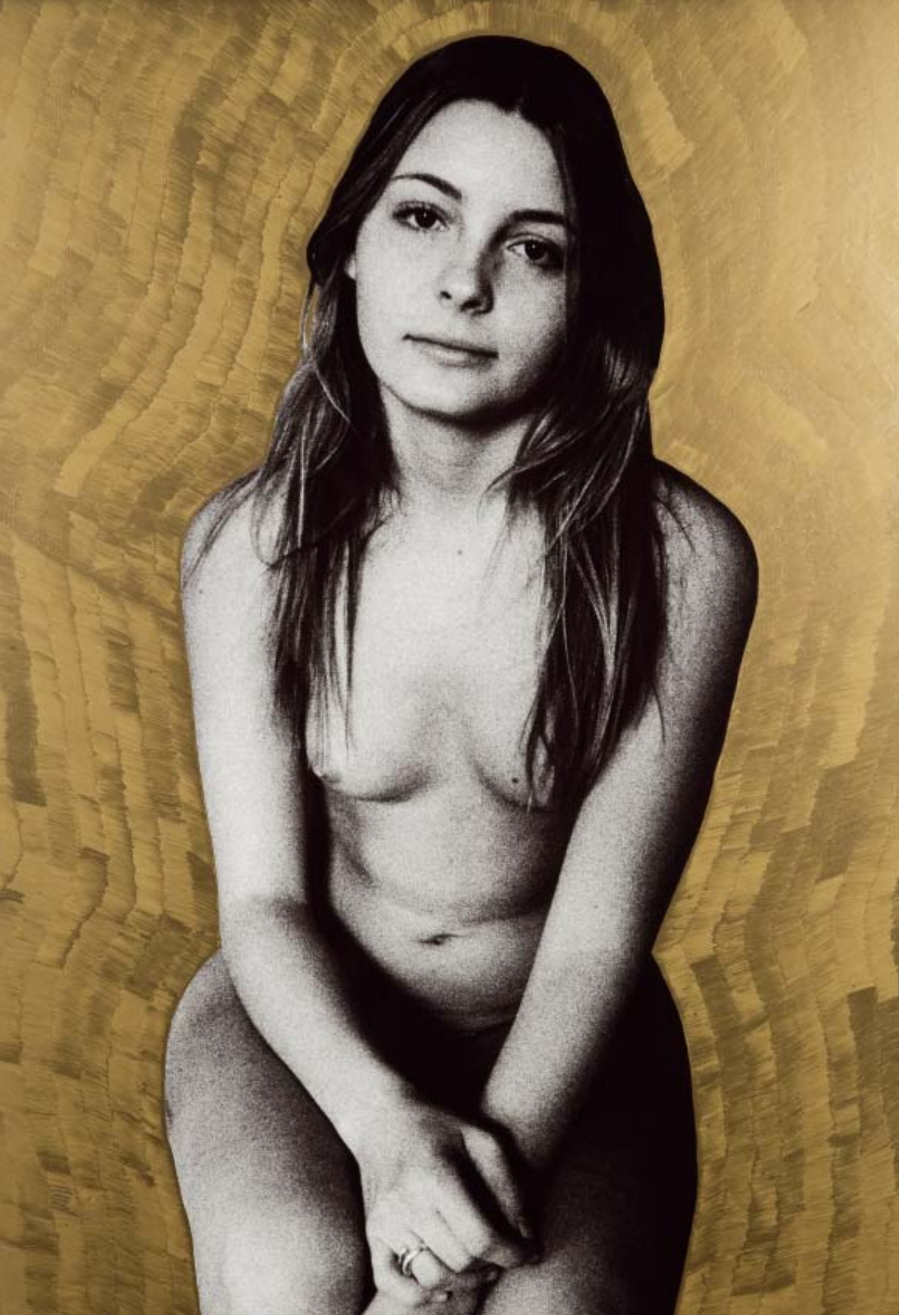
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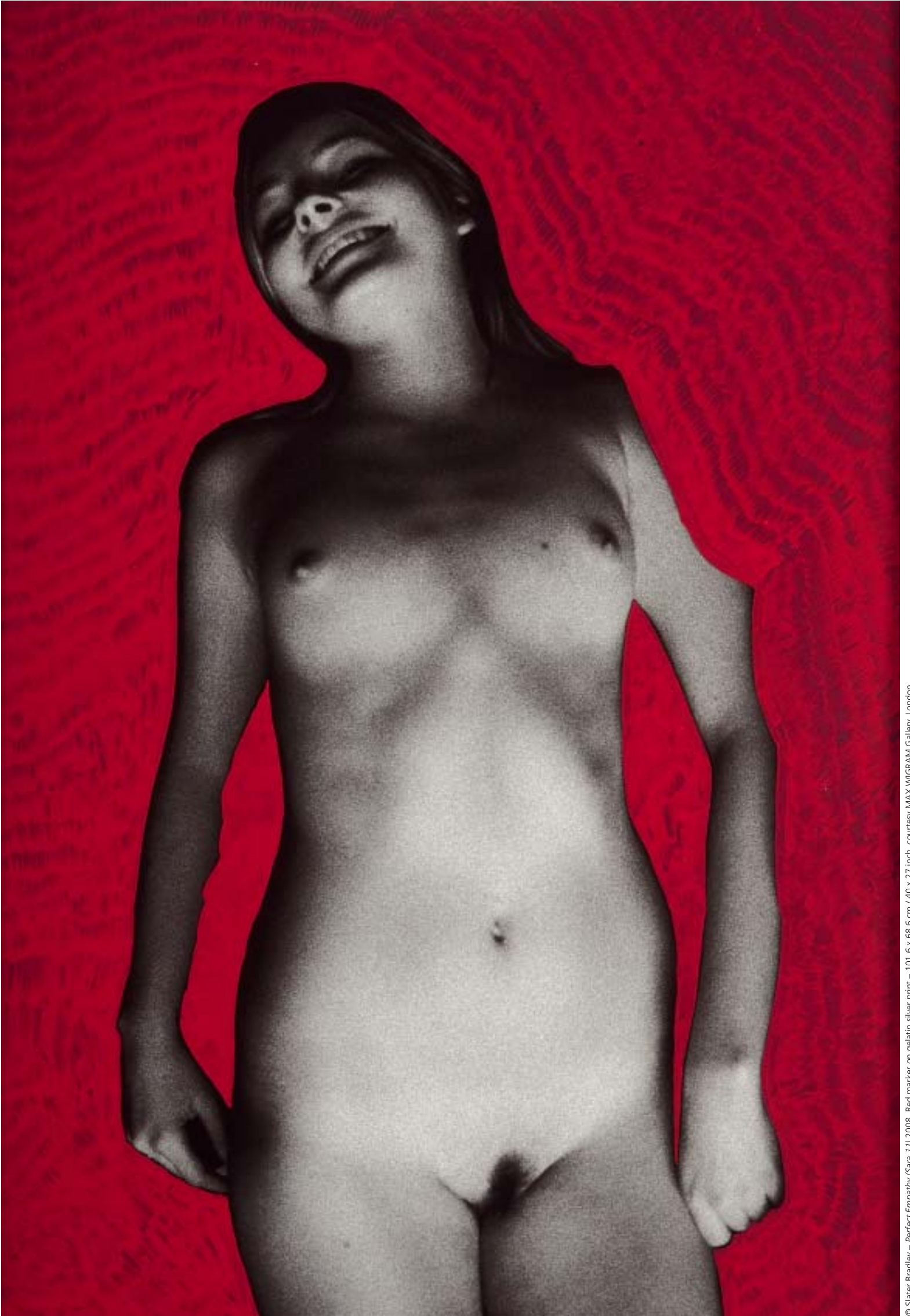












© Slater Bradley - Perfect Empathy (Sara 11) 2008, Red marker on gelatin silver print - 101.6 x 68.6 cm / 40 x 27 inch, courtesy MAX WIGRAM Gallery, London



watch a video in an art fair, and collectors don't want to go to galleries any more. Art must reflect its own particular time.

**EK:** Please tell us about the process of making these pictures. What do you look for when choosing images to enlarge?

**SB:** The models are women in their twenties that I meet by chance or through friends. They have widely differing backgrounds, including Italian, French, American and Native American. Sometimes a friend recommends someone and I meet them for the first time when they arrive at my apartment. Most of them had never posed before and since I'd never photographed models, both of us were inexperienced. I was challenging myself with the rather scary intimacy of the situation. It's difficult to see a lover as a nude, but these women were strangers, or acquaintances at the most. I'm not trying to pursue an iconic girl, and I don't try to direct the women's poses. Instead, I sit with the camera and make the moment of posing go on too long. The women relax, and I become uncomfortable. By my quiet longing and by holding the moment as long as I can, I try to induce them to emote.

I take at least one hundred photos of each model using two different cameras, a 35 mm and a 6-7 medium format. I choose images from contact sheets and then experiment with marker backgrounds on 4 x 6 prints. The final large format prints are all made conventionally on fiber-based paper, a process that is almost obsolete. The grain on the originals is incredible.

**EK:** The flat gold backgrounds in icons are supposed to force the holy figures out of the painting, making them really exist in the viewer's space. Any three dimensional environment within the picture was considered too illusory, unfit for spiritual art. Did you think of these concepts when you obliterated portions of the backgrounds with gold or silver markers?

**SB:** I wanted to create nudes whose power comes out to the viewer, instead of just remaining in the picture to accept the viewer's desire. I also wanted to take away the sense of a specific setting, and thus replace the relationship of the artist to the nude with an evolving relationship between the viewer and the nude, to make the viewer enter a phantom location. Since the photograph has no environment of its own, the collector, or viewer, can hang that piece on the wall and it will fit into their environment.

In addition, photography is about looking through a lens and seeing compositions and space, and video is

about how a protagonist moves through a landscape. Obliterating the backgrounds and blocking out the photograph's two-dimensional space creates a narrative similar to video. One of my biggest problems with photography is that the images have no presence. They are too rapidly consumed. The markers slow down the consuming process and make the images unique. I am interested in tapping into the iconic religious qualities of the images, and also in the collision of the painting and the photograph. Having created an artistic identity devoid of the presence of the artist's hand, I wanted to get back into mark making.

**EK:** Your videos have a very particular sense of time. They often feel like elongated moments. You frequently focus on small portions of single actions—a short dance, a walk—or even on the space between actions. In addition, visual, literary and musical references from different eras are often combined. For example, the harsh contemporary music of the Replikants is included in the soundtrack of *Theory and Observation* along with the footage of Notre Dame, a church begun in 1163. Can you describe how you visualise time in these photographs?

**SB:** The interesting thing about doing nudes is that the camera can hold a moment for as long as you want—until you activate the shutter. The camera allows this unnatural state to emerge within the natural state of the nude. Time is suspended as you look at a body through a lens. It's an experience akin to looking through the keyhole at the nude lying in the grass in *Étants donnés*, Marcel Duchamp's last work—a kind of enticing intimacy.

I've been trying to locate the pure state of photography for so long. It seems to me that the photograph has evolved away from its basic form. It's not just about cataloguing things—it's about looking. I want to slow things down. Nobody looks any more—looking is immediately associated with voyeurism. I want the viewer to get past the moment of recognising a good picture.

**EK:** What about the title *Perfect Empathy*? Your work is about abstract concepts including celebrity, youth, transience, longing and the interchangeable double, but it seems to me that it's always (paradoxically) focused on the uniqueness of the particular person you are filming.

**SB:** Our culture feeds on displays of vulnerability. People expose themselves on reality TV. *Female Gargoyle* (2000) was the first piece I made about a woman on display. It is a video of a woman on an east village rooftop weeping and contemplating sui-

cide. There were police and fire trucks trying to rescue her but I left them out of the piece. Her vulnerability was so intense that I put the words "Amateur Video" above the picture, to remove the viewer from the actual vulnerability and allow them to see it as a news broadcast, to slightly deaden the emotion.

When the video was put on the New York Times website in 2007, I described it with the sentence, "this video is not staged, and unlike the news, there is no resolution; she is suspended, sculpturally, in your perfect empathy." There is no resolution in *Female Gargoyle* and similarly, there is no resolution in these nudes—they are frozen in time. You can't tell why they are there or what they are doing. All you know is what you are seeing, and that is perfect empathy, the original experience with art. It's a suspended state, similar to when you are swept up and become lost in a movie. I'd like the series to give the viewer that experience.

**EK:** Why did you decide to curate a selection of photographs by Gerard Petrus Fieret as part of your exhibition at the Frans Hals Museum?

**SB:** Fieret is a big influence. I want to communicate a sense of warmth and intimacy, and I find those qualities in his work. His pictures are so spontaneous and free; never claustrophobic. He thought his photographs from the 60s and 70s were better than Andy Warhol; that Warhol was ripping him off. He was crazy. I'm interested in anything that destroys the photographic surface, and I admire the way he embraced entropy, allowing his work to be altered by anything, from imperfect fixers to shit from the pigeons he kept in his home. I also like the way he stamped and signed his photographs over and over again, because he was paranoid. He believed everyone was stealing from him. It's such a bizarre coincidence that he died right before my show; it makes my homage more poignant and it shows that my psychic abilities are improving.

TEXT BY ELIZABETH KLEY

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