



## Frieze frame: grim portrait of nightlife women

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SIMON OBARZANEK

10pm - 1am, Karen Woodbury Gallery, Albert St, Richmond, until September 1, [www.kwgallery.com](http://www.kwgallery.com)

PHOTOGRAPHY can make you look serene and contented or compromised, haggard, frightened and uncomfortable. It's between you and the photographer. You either respond to the artist with a sense of wellbeing or you suffer an attack of emptiness, if not tension and resentment as well. Meanwhile, the photographer can find a light that discovers your sparkle or diminishes it, makes you look interesting and attractive or boring and blotchy.

Simon Obarzanek chooses the gloomiest possible format, illumination and address to the spectator. His exhibition at Karen Woodbury Gallery shows 11 young women in party clothes. They're lonely and bleak. Their faces are joyless and dour, with a kind of suspicion and severity underscored by an unflattering lighting from above.

Obarzanek's models all have a dirty shadow under the nose; their eyes seem hollowed into their skulls; the upper lip disappears and each young woman sports a photographic beard. The vertical light is sure to detect any bulge in a tummy; and the legs, if not amputated by the shade, are apologetic appendages that seem somehow optional.

With the title 10pm - 1am, the exhibition proposes that the women are nightclub girls, possibly emerging from the din of the nocturnal boyfriend market, with their makeup challenged from within by the sweat of dancing. But they have no company and most have no handbag. If they enjoyed themselves inside, they have only disappointment now. They stand bedraggled in a state of internal evacuation, alienated, posted individually on the wall like human shells in serial discomfort for all to marvel at their physical and emotional slump.

In earlier exhibitions, Obarzanek photographed youths of both sexes in black and white, it seemed with a lens of short focal length and pugnacious proximity to the face, making the youngsters puffy and slope-shouldered. Now the serial motif is narrower: young women, with the light carving shadow under the head, breasts and belly, sharply picking out distensions and pimples in colour.

In front of the grim **frieze**, you wonder how the women were lured into this photographic treachery. The euphoric narcissistic expectations of the 10pm-1am set are disappointed. The viewer, contemplating the loud excitement and seduction in the provocative scene, can only empathise with the way the club culture has been deceived.

There is every ethical and aesthetic reason to damn these chilly impersonal pictures. But I found the exhibition absorbing and compelling. The sadness is somehow grave and also symmetrical, as you are forced to contemplate the motives of the photographer, "picking up" his vicarious harem - or wanting to suggest it - wherever girls hang out at their most vulnerable.

The works have an undeniable presence, even if this is gained at the expense of the female subjects. Their forms project in a totemic way, as in #2, where the jewellery adds an occult charm to the ghost-like figure. The women are captured between flesh and spectre, transformed into monumental ghosts by the apparatus, and uncannily induced to exchange their life for shade.

The photographs are about a ritual more than individual people: the ritual of young women who go out and of the photographer who goes out. The overlap is sour and taciturn, a dark stand-off, as if suggesting that the culture of the nubile lass is tragic, where the tender and the brazen are forced into mutual detachment, and where the only logical feeling is mistrust.

The classical voyeur will wrestle with his feelings in front of these severe images of young women without names. Despite their sombre photographic prison, they remain sexually suggestive. For example, #10 shows a buxom woman unselfconsciously touching the inside of her thigh over the luscious blue dress, causing the horizon of the bra to slip to one side. The chastity of the austere light and gaze is somewhat loose at this moment.

Because of their monumentality, the works appeal to iconic depictions of mature girls in the past. It is as if the archaic sculptures of young women (korai) from ancient Greece have come out of 21/2 millenniums of civilisation looking like this: oppressed, disappointed, undignified, spooky, encumbered by the gaze and the photographic booth that captures them. On feminist grounds, this is not an image that we want to cultivate; but for all that, it is necessary to look and ponder.

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