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"It's a cosmetic world"

An Interview with Larry Fink: Preface

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- 1 When I called him in early February, fine art-documentary-advertising photographer Larry Fink was just returning from men's fashion week in Milan. The occasion for the trip was an exhibit of his work in collaboration with one of his regular clients, Woolrich Woolen Mills. Fink had shot the clothing company's catalogue several times, but this was a different project. Documentary pictures of the logging community he had taken in the 1980s were used as background for a fashion show evoking "Man in Nature." The life-size, black-and-white prints were then displayed at The Galleria Lorenzelli under the title "An Outdoor Concept".
- 2 In a previous conversation, the photographer had defined himself as a "crossover artist." The Milan project certainly supported this idea, suggesting further that the pictures themselves were crossover *images*. Allowing these photographs of rugged backwood life as a setting for the presentation of a new line of clothing was also a way, he tells me laughing, "to do some business. We made \$20,000 and a couple of first-class tickets." This kind of money enables him to devote more time and energy to his current project: setting up a studio in his Pennsylvania farm and working on a series of close-up portraits of people living around Martins Creek. What he has in mind, he tells me, is to shoot the sitters up close, to bring out the almost mineral quality of human faces.
- 3 Still, the simplistic opposition between "personal" work and "bread-and-butter" assignments does not do justice to the complex itinerary of Fink's photographs. What images turn out to mean can never be taken for granted, as several of his other forays into fashion photography make clear. A few years ago, various assignments for GQ and *Vanity Fair* gave him what he calls "access" to the backstage glamour of *couture*. What came out of it, apart from various photo spreads in Condé Nast publications, was a strangely hypnotic monograph entitled *Runway* (2000), in which fascination and satire converge to portray a luring, yet listless human comedy.
- 4 The following year, another fashion shoot—"perhaps a compromise for me," he wrote afterwards¹—turned out to be one of his strongest political statements. Still incensed at the outcome of the 2000 elections, Fink posed a George W. Bush look-alike among

scantily-clad models. In the aftermaths of 9/11, these *tableaux* echoing Max Beckmann and George Grosz's representations of a decadent Weimar Republic were turned down by *The New York Times Magazine*, which had commissioned them. Three years later, they would be displayed at the powerHouse Gallery in New York, shedding an oblique and bitter light on the ongoing Republican National Convention.

- 5 In both cases, Fink's involvement with what remains a luxury industry with pretensions to artistic integrity allowed him to make a rather comfortable living and keep up a successful business (he has two full-time assistants). It also provided a new episode in his visual exploration of all forms of social rituals (others include cocktail and birthday parties in 1984's *Social Graces* and organized violence in 1997's *Boxing*), giving him a chance to contribute his own ironical commentary on today's "cosmetic world."
- 6 His most recent books, however, may suggest a different path. *Primal Elegance* (Lodima Press, 2005) is a small collection of fourteen pictures of black mantises taken in the 1970's. The insects' only business is survival, their grace undeniable yet hardly social, their violence muted and still. Fink's latest book, *Somewhere There's Music* (Damiani, 2006), is about different animals. Most of the pictures he gathered in this retrospective testify eloquently to the photographer's love for jazz and for the "cats" that play it in clubs and studios, down in cellars and out on the street. Little reference to business there; much more to art and soul. Satire is almost entirely gone, save perhaps for a few recent portraits of MTV pop stars.
- 7 On two separate occasions, once at home in Martins Creek and a few months later over the phone, Larry Fink accepted to describe what the business of being a photographer is like, how it all started for him and how he is looking to redefine his career. The following discussion includes questions from both interviews, conducted on August 6th, 2006 and February 1st, 2007.