

Images of Images: Notes on Anne Collier's and Kotama Bouabane's photo practices

By Noa Bronstein

Photography, since its very beginning, has been self-reflexive, with photos and cameras themselves becoming subject matter for further forays into imagemaking. Recent works by Anne Collier (b. Los Angeles, lives in New York) and Kotama Bouabane (b. Pakse, Laos; lives in Toronto) recall this history while making visible the ways in which culture and gender are appropriated and commodified within photography. In particular, Collier and Bouabane make visual inquiries into the dissemination of ubiquitous photographic instruments of marketing, production, and ultimately consumerism. Through the construction, circulation, and recontextualization of photographic advertisements and manuals, both artists challenge

the ways in which we see and consume various media. Although they have very different approaches to image production, both photographers “address subjects germane to the world of photography while simultaneously questioning clichés and tropes within that sphere.”¹

Collier's series *Woman With A Camera* (2006–present) depicts, as the title suggests, photographic ephemera in which various women are positioned with an assortment of lens-based apparatuses. *Woman With Cameras #1* and *#2* (both 2012) introduces a headless, sprawling female nude whose anatomy is peppered by Contax, Olympus, Pentax, and Bronica cameras. Her body stretches over a full magazine spread and is truncated by the fold of the spine with the foregrounded cameras intimately hovering over her reclining figure. This kind of tropic depiction reappears in *Zoom, 1978* (printed 2009), which likewise features a headless, lounging female clothed in nothing more than thigh-high stockings and gold high heels. Here, however, the female subject is bionic, as a large camera is propped on top of her neck. With one hand she adjusts her Cyclops-like oculus and with the other she seems at the ready to release the shutter, as if to say she is recording us as much as we are visually consuming her. The same exchange between subject and viewer is rendered by *Woman With A Camera (Postcard, Verso Recto)* (2013). A mostly nude female adorned by an assortment of shell and beaded jewelry leans slightly to the right as she points her camera at something or someone out of the viewer's sightline. Collier has paired the *National Geographic*-like postcard image with an image of its blank recto. Written across the barrier that demarcates the typical postcard spaces used for addresses and messages is the caption “A. Réal Photograph.” The postcard also tells us that this image, titled *Say Cheese before I click. (Turkana Girl)*, is from the “Edition East Africa, 1312.”

Rather than doctoring, cropping, or altering these images, Collier simply re-composites readily available materials. Shot against stark, white backgrounds, the magazines, postcards, advertisements, and other objects that appear in the *Woman With A Camera* series are shown as is. This directness should not be confused with neutrality. “In these and others of their type, Collier has mined a rich vein of

Woman With A Camera (diptych) (2006) from the series *Woman With A Camera* (2006–present) by Anne Collier; courtesy the artist and Anton Kern Gallery, New York; Corvi-Mora, London; Marc Foxx Gallery, Los Angeles; The Modern Institute/Toby Webster Ltd., Glasgow; Galerie Neu, Berlin





Sulphur Mountain II (2015) by Kotama Bouabane; courtesy the artist

irony in which women's bodies and phallic cameras become intertwined in a misogynist system that is as consistent as it is extensive."² While several works in the series might challenge the cliché of passive female subjects as consumable objects, these images still seem to depict deeper photographic tensions. *Woman with a Camera (diptych)* (2006), for instance, pictures publicity stills from the 1978 thriller *Eyes of Laura Mars* (directed by Irvin Kershner), in which a fashion photographer, played by Faye Dunaway, develops the ability to see through the eyes of a killer, through the lens of her camera. Despite this bizarre affliction, Dunaway, pictured with her Nikon camera in hand, could be seen, as curator Michael Darling has noted, as an image "of female empowerment and agency or perhaps some kind of reversal of the male gaze."³ Celebrities reappear elsewhere in Collier's series. *Woman With A Camera (The Last Sitting, Bert Stern)* (2009) documents a photograph of Marilyn Monroe, also posed with her Nikon camera in hand, in what would be her last photo shoot. Monroe is pictured here in the pages of Stern's popular 1962 monograph, *The Last Sitting*, surrounded by colorful tabs, presumably marking the artist's time and investment in pouring over this particular publication. Darling further notes that it is more conceivable to decode images such as these

as further examples of male fantasy rising up rhizomatically through popular culture. Collier has found the photo industry itself to be rampantly and (probably) unwittingly sexist, and her photographs skewering its conventions surround the *Woman With A Camera* series with a halo of critique. . . . In these and others of their type, Collier has mined a rich vein of irony in which women's bodies and phallic cameras become intertwined in a misogynist system that is as consistent as it is extensive.⁴

Collier's unease over the sexualization of women and the commodification of the female body by the mass media has garnered her comparisons to Sarah Charlesworth, Barbara Kruger, and Laurie Simmons.⁵

Those featured in *Woman With A Camera* are not shown as meeting our gaze. Rather, their bodies and celebrity have been appropriated as tools of marketing, branding, and commodity fetish. Perhaps as a corrective gesture, Collier has developed a series of large-format ocular imagery, using her own eyes and those borrowed from other mass-produced sources. The enlarged, singular eye in both *Developing Tray #2 (Grey)* (2009) and *Cut (Color)* (2010) stare directly at the viewer. In the former, a close-up of the artist's eye sits in a developing tray, while in the latter, it is bisected by a paper-cutting tool. Conjuring all kinds of platitudes about the eyes being the window to the soul, Collier's images also compel a larger history of photography and the fraught relationship between the eye, the photographer, and the camera.⁶ In her contextualization of Collier's practice, Chrissie Iles posits that

during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, photography had played a key role in the construction and dissemination of female sexual and emotional archetypes, as the social mores surrounding psychological problems, sex, and nudity loosened up to a degree that allowed an unprecedentedly eroticized objectification of the female body and the emotions hidden within it in advertising and popular culture, reflecting the double bind of a permissive society that both liberated and stereotyped women.⁷

Iles continues by stating that "the struggle for control of the photographic image reaches further into history, playing out across the entire twentieth century in direct correlation to the increase in women's social and economic power, and to the threat posed to male authority."⁸ Collier's isolating of and focus on eyes likens our instrument of seeing to the camera's mechanisms of observation. This particular kind of portraiture allows Collier to stare back, to set her gaze outward and inward. Outward in the sense that she stares back at those who would typically set their gaze upon her and other female subjects,

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and inward, in that she examines the internal workings of the photography and advertising industry.

Similarly, Bouabane's recent project *We'll get there fast and then we'll take it slow* (2016) takes as its starting point a found image of two coconuts from a 1970s Kodak manual on color correction. The seductive image of the coconuts presented as drinking vessels recalls alluring advertisements for exclusive resorts or opulent travel destinations. Bouabane was immediately interested in the image as appearing to conflate the banality of the content found within typical technical photographic manuals and the exoticized use of coconuts to denote tropical and luxurious getaways. This initial interest generated a larger project in which Bouabane experiments with the coconut as material and as subject matter. In doing so, he implicates photography's complacency in the exoticization and commodification of the animate and inanimate subjects foregrounded by the camera's expansive reach.

Recalling the earliest of photographic experiments, such as those realized by Henry Fox Talbot or Anna Atkins, Bouabane's photograms render the coconut as an abstract, graphic object. For Bouabane's exhibition at Toronto's Gallery 44 Centre for Contemporary Photography, curated by Leila Timmins (which ran April 29–May 28, 2016), the photograms were paired with images made with a coconut pinhole camera and images produced by using coconut water in the analog developing process. But what separates this particular work from photography's earliest outputs appears to be the humorous undertones

Woman With A Camera (Postcard, Verso Recto) (2013) from the series *Woman With A Camera* (2006–present) by Anne Collier, courtesy the artist and Anton Kern Gallery, New York; Corvi-Mora, London; Marc Foxx Gallery, Los Angeles; The Modern Institute/Toby Webster Ltd., Glasgow; Galerie Neu, Berlin



that inform Bouabane's series. The negative image produced by the coconut photogram appears anamorphic and somewhat comical. The grid of images contains slight variations in gesture and mood that the coconut faces seem to emote. This kind of playful gesture is also at work in *Sulphur Mountain II* (2015). Taken in Canada while Bouabane was in residence at the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity, the artist positions himself amid a group of tourists taking selfie-stick snapshots to document themselves within the surrounding scenery. Bouabane's prop selfie stick, however, is precariously balancing a coconut on its very tip. This particular image starts to move Bouabane's project away from a purely obsessive study of the coconut to a commentary on image production and circulation.

Sulphur Mountain II was accompanied by a small shelf on which Bouabane stacked a series of take-away postcards. The postcards picture the artist posing triumphantly with his coconut selfie stick amid the scenic panoramas of the Rocky Mountain range. This gesture seems to evoke all manner of photographic ephemera. Combining the portraiture of the carte-de-visite with the sublime landscape or ubiquitous travel images common in stereoscopic collections,⁹ the small stack of images both enacts and critiques the instruments of historic and contemporary image circulation. These kinds of images were initially propelled by a collective urge to collect¹⁰—and, by extension, a shared impulse to possess a wider world of objects, people, and places. Further, “the carte-de-visite is a particularly distinctive commodity form, because what is being exchanged is pictures of people. The person being photographed is turned into a thing, a picture, and then this thing is sold, exchanged and consumed.”¹¹ This kind of picturing of picture-taking offers a self-reflexive commentary that, like Collier's works, evokes the slippery power dynamics between those in front of and those behind the camera. Bouabane's selfie stick seems to ask us to consider what implications there might be for the mechanisms of image-construction when the photographer and subject are one and the same. Self-portraiture is not necessarily a new phenomenon, but it is certainly one that is increasingly common, and yet ceaselessly complicated. Several scholars have noted that the selfie taker has been codified not just as a psychological type but also as a physical manifestation of certain cultural prejudices.¹² As Bouabane noted in the panel discussion “To keep (something) in position: props in contemporary photography” held in May 2016 at the Gladstone Hotel in Toronto, *Sulphur Mountain II* problematizes the stereotype of the Asian photo-taking tourist.¹³ Folded into this image are the complicated layers in which representation is negotiated between viewer, maker, and subject.

Bouabane's project borrows its title from the 1988 Beach Boys' song *Kokomo*, which alludes to a fictional island off the Florida Keys. As Timmins notes,

the exhibition explores the construction of tropical non-places—ones that exist only in the North American middle-class imagination—through numerous familiar tropes in travel photography. Just as *Kokomo* becomes a stand-in for all things exotic, images featuring palm trees, coconuts, or dewy cocktails conjure ideas of paradise, escape, leisure, and luxury.¹⁴

Bouabane emphasizes how the coconut has become an abbreviation for any number of “exotic” locales, and that our notions of place are often folded into such objects. His work seems to further point to the ways in which photography flattens our understanding of place by fo-

cusing in on objects that homologize “exotic” sites. In other words, the photographic tends to absolve places of their complicated and nuanced realities and histories, such as those related to colonialism and resource extraction, and instead turns these sites into visually and physically consumable versions of paradise readily available to viewers and tourists.

Centered within the exhibition at Gallery 44, Bouabane materializes a floor-to-ceiling installation constructed of found images from a *National Geographic* magazine special edition on bamboo. Barely visible on the stems of the artificial bamboo forest are scenes of individuals harvesting this lucrative resource. From afar, this labor is subsumed by lush greens and the shiny, reflective plastic tubes that contain the source material. Bouabane notes in an interview with Timmins that:

the magazine almost spans the whole history of photography and so is implicated in the politics of the medium that have spanned its history. When the magazine started in October 1888, it was trying to open up the world to new audiences who were unable to travel and it was trying to share knowledge that no one had. Unfortunately, our way of viewing these images has changed and instead of opening up the world, they have the capability to limit and close down knowledge or exploit the people in the photographs.¹⁵

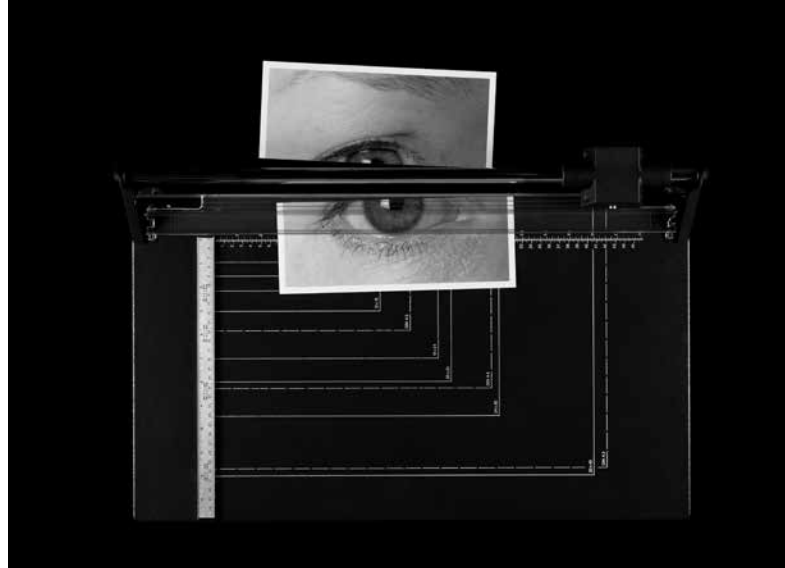
Bamboo and coconuts share a similar trajectory. These natural resources have become lucrative cash crops, but have also been marketed for possessing qualities not purely related to agriculture. Bamboo and coconuts have been adopted by various multinational companies for use in various products due to their eco-friendly and sustainable attributes, while also being marketed as having holistic and mystical health or spiritualistic properties. A case in point is the language used by the photographic paper brand Hahnemühle to describe their bamboo-based paper line. The description used on Hahnemühle’s website states that theirs is

the world’s first digital fine art inkjet paper made from bamboo fibres. Bamboo represents spirituality, naturalness and resource-saving paper production. Particularly suitable for warm-toned colour and monochrome prints, Bamboo really highlights the sensuality of images.¹⁶

The images featured on the paper’s packaging are of Asian men modeled in stereotypical and arguably derogatory dress and poses and include a young man wearing a bamboo hat (often referred to as the “rice paddy hat”) and two individuals engaging in what appears to be a martial art. The tagline that follows the images reads: “BAMBOO Spiritual Black & White and Colour Photography.”

Bouabane’s compulsive use of coconuts speaks to a culture of excessive marketing and branding and the ways in which nature and culture have been commodified and made consumable by these forms of mass communication. But it might also speak to the concept of economies of scale. In economics, “economies of scale” refers to the reduction in cost per unit due to increased production. The quantity offsets the expenses as cost advantages are related to the scale and size of the production line. This might also be a pertinent metaphor for photography. Perhaps the more images we have access to, the more naturalized or neutralized systems of representation become. In the case of *National Geographic*, for example, the geopolitical is subsumed by the lure of looking and the seductive pull of images of “exotic” places and cultures. Bouabane’s project seems to stress that the scale of exoticized image circulation makes it difficult to move from a passive gaze to critical visualization.

Both Collier and Bouabane present us with photographs of photographs, images within images. While both artists use analog technolo-



Cut (Color) (2010) by Anne Collier; courtesy the artist and Anton Kern Gallery, New York; Corvi-Mora, London; Marc Foxx Gallery, Los Angeles; The Modern Institute/Toby Webster Ltd., Glasgow; Galerie Neu, Berlin

gies and conceptually attend to the history of photography, their work equally addresses our image-saturated present. Collier’s appropriative use of the same kind of stark, black-and-white backgrounds used in product promotions, the recurring employment of doubling in her practice, and her enlarged images that conjure billboard advertisements invoke contemporary forms of commercialized image production. Correspondingly, Bouabane’s hypervisualization of the coconut reproduces the rapacious circulation of mass-produced images. Borrowing the very techniques that are being critiqued problematizes the ways in which photography and image construction maneuver within systems of economic and social power.

Images now move faster than ever. And while there is more to look at than ever before, we seem to see less and less. Collier and Bouabane reflect on this kind of hypervisibility and the conditions in which images are produced, but their work also asks that we slow our processes of looking. *We’ll get there fast and then we’ll take it slow* seems an appropriate directive from both artists, as both Collier and Bouabane unsettle established orders of representation and, in the process, enable new modes of viewing and consuming images.

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NOTES 1. Michael Darling, “Anne Collier: Woman with a Camera,” in *Anne Collier*, exh. cat. (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago in association with ARTBOOK | D.A.P., 2014), 11. 2. *Ibid.*, 15. 3. *Ibid.* 4. *Ibid.* 5. Karen Rosenberg, “A Tale in Pictures of Pictures,” *New York Times*, July 31, 2014, www.nytimes.com/2014/08/01/arts/design/anne-collier-a-photography-retrospective-at-bard-college.html?_r=1. 6. Chrissie Iles, “Anne Collier: Once More, With Feeling,” in *Anne Collier*, 21. 7. *Ibid.*, 22. 8. *Ibid.* 9. Denis Pellerin, “The origins and development of stereoscopy,” in *Paris in 3D: From Stereoscopy to Virtual Reality, 1850–2000*, ed. Kim Timby, Françoise Reynaud, and Catherine Tambrun (Paris, Musée Carnavalet: 2000), 46. 10. Mary Warner Marien, *Photography: A Cultural History* (London: Laurence King Publishing, 2002), 217. 11. Geoffrey Batchen, “Dreams of ordinary life: Cartes-de-visite and the bourgeois imagination,” in *Photography: Theoretical Snapshots*, ed. J.J. Long, Andrea Noble, and Edward Welch (New York: Routledge, 2009), 87. 12. See, for example, Jill Walker Rettberg, *Seeing Ourselves Through Technology: How We Use Selfies, Blogs and Wearable Devices to See and Shape Ourselves* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2014); and Anne Burns, “Self(ie)-Discipline: Social Regulation as Enacted Through the Discussion of Photographic Practice,” *International Journal of Communication* 9 (2015): 1716–33. 13. “To keep (something) in position: props in contemporary photography” was organized by Gallery 44 Centre for Contemporary Photography and was moderated by Gabrielle Moser at the Gladstone Hotel, Toronto, on May 14, 2016. 14. Leila Timmins, curatorial essay for *We’ll get there fast and then we’ll take it slow*, Scotiabank CONTACT Photography Festival exh. cat. (Toronto: Scotiabank CONTACT Photography Festival, 2016). 15. Kotama Bouabane, “We’ll get there fast and then we’ll take it slow: Kotama Bouabane in conversation with Leila Timmins,” Gallery 44 Centre for Contemporary Photography, <https://gallery44.org/exhibitions/well-get-there-fast-and-then-well-take-it-slow>. 16. “Bamboo,” Hahnemühle FineArt, www.hahnemuehle.com/en/digital-fineart/digital-fineart-collection/matt-fineart/p/Product/show/8/6.html.