

JUDY COLEMAN

LAGUNA ART MUSEUM AUGUST 4 — OCTOBER 1, 1989



Maelstrom, 1987

IF THE MOST STRIKING QUALITY OF PHOTOGRAPHY IS ITS APPARENT FIDELITY TO THE WAY THE WORLD LOOKS, THE MOST MYSTERIOUS IS ITS SUBTLE UNDERMINING OF OUR IDEAS OF HOW THE WORLD ACTS.

NO PAINTING OR SCULPTURE CAN SEEM AS PERMANENT, AS IMMUTABLE AS THE MOST MODEST PHOTOGRAPH. SCRATCH A PAINTING AND YOU HAVE BOTH DEFACED THE SUBJECT AND

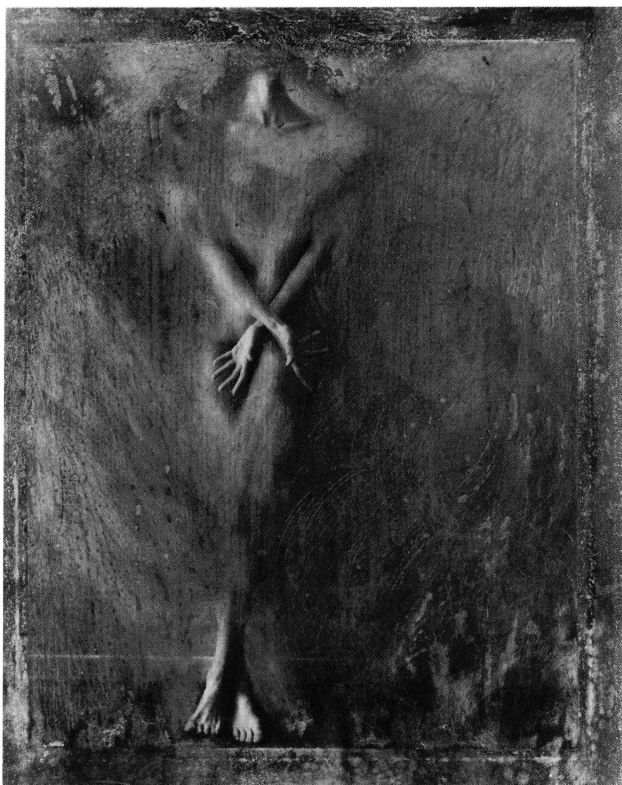
destroyed the illusion; cut a photograph in a hundred pieces and it will regenerate its missing parts. A faded painting is a worthless souvenir; a faded photograph is only a darker veil between us and a constant past.

TIME DOES NOT PASS IN A PHOTOGRAPH, and the world does not change. Events don't start or end, yet they occur.

JUDY COLEMAN'S INCREASING UNDERSTANDING and manipulation of this surreal truth of photography is the major achievement of her work of the last six years, notwithstanding its continuing technical innovation, impressive scale, grandly expressive gestures and emotional potency.

A 1983 WORK IN THE COLLECTION OF the Laguna Art Museum, *Crossed Hands*, reveals Coleman's early interest in photography as a temporal metaphor. Like all of her work since, the picture is a photograph of a photograph: Coleman has manipulated the surface of the first print, then re-photographed it and had it greatly enlarged.¹ The image is of a standing female figure, seen as if behind a frosted glass wall: a figure "frozen" in time, whether we read it as a carcass actually hung in a deep freeze or, more likely, a creature preserved in amber or embedded in stone.

COLEMAN'S 1986-87 SERIES, *FALLING Bodies*, is full of marks suggesting the idea of



Crossed Hands, 1983

movement or propulsion, yet the figures themselves are not so much caught in gesture as they are limply awaiting fate or, as in *Maelstrom*, 1987, bound up and set adrift or distributed to predetermined celestial points. Despite the series title, the bodies often seem just as likely to be rising as falling — or most probable of all, considering the stasis inherent in the photographic illusion, in a state of suspension between the two extremes.

IN A STATEMENT ABOUT THE *FALLING Bodies* series, the artist recognizes that she has achieved an emotional parallel to the photographic illusion of suspended time:

In diving from a high board into a pool, stepping off into space at the beginning of the dive and slicing through the water at the end of the dive are less anxiety producing than the span of time in between. That time, which is flooded with uncertainty, becomes magnified and seems to last forever. It is the sense of that experience which I intend to convey in this work.²

COLEMAN'S *ARCHAEOLOGY* SERIES, NOT represented here, prompted similar contemplations on time from critic James Hugunin, who thought the pictures suggested "not only the aftermath of a nuclear Armageddon, but the frightful mass embalment of the inhabitants of Pompeii and her sister city Herculaneum."³

RECENT WORKS SUCH AS *MEMORY AND Desire*, *Conjugation of Silence* and *Aura*, all 1988, continue the artist's use of visual metaphors for time controlled. In *Memory and Desire* the figure is tangled in a net or skein, held as surely as the empty shell of a wasp in a spider's web. *Conjugation of Silence* depicts a large nude, archaic in its featureless form, engulfed in a darkness offering no opportunity for movement or escape. The figure in *Aura*, which presumably emanates the glow which surrounds it, is also contained by that same force field.

THESE PICTURES ARE BEYOND TIME, BOTH by virtue of their photographic specificity and by their abhorrence of reference to anything outside the figure. As Coleman herself puts it, in a statement written about the works produced in 1983:

The photographic genesis of the figure is an important part of the work for me because the figure existed in real time and in real space and had quantifiable physical and emotional feelings at the time of the recording — it was not merely conjured.⁴

COLEMAN'S INVOLVEMENT WITH THE temporal illusion of photography is hardly a dalliance. Her dark view of Everywoman's experience, an

existence of isolation and disconnectedness, is given credence by her appeal to the photograph's authority, and the sense of time stopped dead adds to the poignancy of the isolation.

COLEMAN SAYS SHE DOESN'T SEE THE figures in her pictures as either having or lacking strength; they are merely "riding out some psychological moment or occurrence."⁵ Yet they clearly are not active agents of their own good. In only one image, the 1983 *Woman on Fire*, do we see a gesture even of active acceptance — and that is in a picture of a figure embracing the fire which consumes her.

IN EVERY CASE, THE GESTURES AND positions of the figures (all female) suggest submission and containment. The crossed hands in the picture of the same name, for instance, are not turned inward in a self-protective gesture implying modesty; they are open in supplication. Or perhaps they are bound, along with the legs: perhaps the image is of a prisoner or a slave.

COLEMAN SAYS THE WORK IS "ABOUT powerful emotions, powerfully felt. . . . It comes as close to exploring the unconscious mind as I can get."⁶

SUSAN SONTAG CALLED PHOTOGRAPHY "a soft murder . . . a semblance of rape."⁷ Judy Coleman's work both engages and reflects upon the calculated viciousness of photographic fact.

Charles Desmarais
Director



Memory and Desire, 1988

NOTES

1. Critic Dinah Berland gives a succinct description of Coleman's working method in a 1987 article: "The process she has developed, which has become somewhat more complex over time, consists of first taking a [4x5-inch] black-and-white Polaroid of herself. The Polaroid print, which lends itself well to surface treatment, is painted with both oil and acrylic paints, built up with wax and a variety of other materials, heated, drawn upon with graphite and abraded with sharp or rough objects including sandpaper and steel wool. . . ."

"The image [is] so small that Coleman works with a jeweler's loop [sic] for magnification and etching needles among her many unconventional tools. For one image, she even pulled out some of her own curly hairs, dipped them in white paint and scattered them over her working surface. . . ."

"She also leaves fingerprints in some pieces as clues to scale. When the original collage — or 'maquette' as she prefers to call it — is complete, Coleman becomes a straight photographer again, carefully lighting and rephotographing her small composite with an [8x10-inch] camera.

"The large negative is then enlarged many times to create the final wall-size print." Dinah Berland, "'Falling Bodies' Gives L. A. Artist a Big Lift," *Los Angeles Herald Examiner*, March 27, 1987: 34. A more detailed discussion of process is in Franklin Cameron, "Genesis: The Polaroid Transmutations of Artist-Photographer Judy Coleman," *PHOTOgraphic* (February 1988): 26-30.

2. Judy Coleman, "Falling Bodies," typescript statement dated March 1987. A copy is in the files of the Laguna Art Museum.

3. James Hugunin, *Celebrating Two Decades in Photography*, Grunwald Center Studies, no. 6 (Los Angeles: Grunwald Center for Graphic Arts, 1985), 35.

4. Judy Coleman, "Statement," undated typescript copy in the files of the Laguna Art Museum.

5. Interview with the author, July 12, 1989.

6. Ibid.

7. Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), 24.