



Lynn Cazabon | *Story of M*





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Hallwalls Contemporary Arts Center | February 15 to March 10, 2003

Empathy Through Fabulation

In *Story of M*, Baltimore artist Lynn Cazabon recreates a version of a life from component parts retrieved only through happenstance. All the miscellaneous objects, video tapes and films used in this multi-media work were once the possessions of a now-deceased steelworker from Pittsburgh. In order to recover outstanding debts, M's personal belongings were sold posthumously. Whatever could not be sold was bagged up and awaiting the dustbin of history, discovered and recovered when Cazabon was purchasing 8 mm films from a Pittsburgh antique dealer.

Cazabon's use of these personal effects reflects the compulsion of the detective as much as that of the artist. Her treatment of M's possessions echoes the diligent caution of the archivist, an effort to document without imposing meaning, but instead allowing meaning to reveal itself. The archive is incomplete, so the meaning is shaped around the sundry bits of detritus left for consideration.

The bulk of M's leftover possessions appear to be pornographic—old magazines, 8mm films, video-tapes, photographs, even a bottle of “Emotion Lotion.” The dated quality of these sexual accoutrements lends them a seedy texture and the photo documents Cazabon concocts—each leftover possession occupying its only lonely space—heightens the underlying sense of alienation. Like mugshots of desire, they appear to draw us into a highly personal and lonely space.

If it is unfair to draw presumptions from possessions, we are also provided with M's filmed self-portraits. And it is these video segments that broaden the fractional portrait of M and suggest that the operative word may be *alone* rather than *lonely*. Filming himself in his home, the images alternate between a Spencer Tracy lookalike in button-down shirt, hat and glasses, arms firmly crossed and a defiantly cross-dressed M, adorned in stockings, nightgown, wig, glasses, with hands on hips. Underneath the feminine trappings, it is apparent that M maintains a don't-give-a-damn attitude. If we find his shift in personae disjuncting, there is nothing to suggest that M shares that perspective or perceives his own behavior as aberrant.

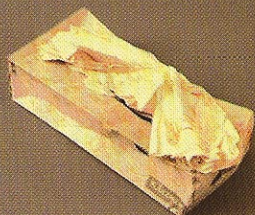
A final layer of ambience involves over one hundred selected audio clips from the materials M lefts behind: the sounds of a man alone in his space, walking, grunting, coughing; the sound of a radio station perennially playing music from the 1940s, 50s and 60s; Reagan and Clinton-era newscasts, with the occasional Nixon/Ford era stories; and the sound of pornography M was taping off the screen of the tv, with his own director's commentary.

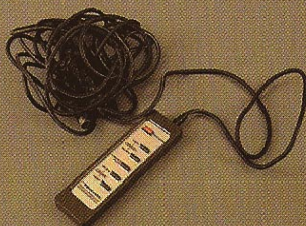
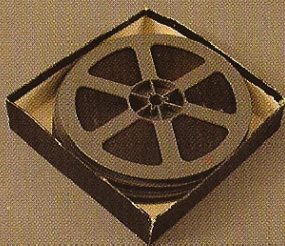


What we have in *Story of M* is a fiction derived from true parts. It is not the entirety of a life, but the proportion of the life we see is wrought with both intensity and ease. The success of Cazabon's artistic sleuthing is to reveal both of these apparently disparate qualities. M's stock of possessions—cheap personal items and cheap porno—reeks of tawdry estrangement, an escape from a social life, but his filmed self-portraits emit another aura. Macho, almost preening, when dressed as a man and completely at ease in drag, M does not betray any quality of self-doubt. He is comfortable in his own skin.

In some fleeting exterior footage, M sets up the camera to film himself alongside a riverbank in Pittsburgh. In overcoat and hat, he looks composed and elegant, by himself but unconcerned. It is a central image to *Story of M* as it reiterates that the empathy we develop for M is only partially centered around a recognition of shared alienation. It is difficult not to be reminded that we live as we dream, alone. Beyond this, we are drawn toward M's everpresent sense of self, confident and unwavering. His desires are his, without apology.

John Massier
Visual Arts Curator







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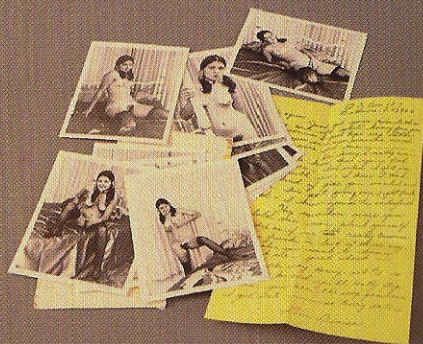
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Lynn Cazabon was born in Detroit, Michigan and currently resides in Baltimore. Her photographic and installation work has been shown around the US and in Canada. Solo exhibitions have taken place at Artists Space in New York, Schroeder Romero in Brooklyn, Vox Galerie in Montreal, and the Mattress Factory in Pittsburgh. Recent group exhibitions featuring her work have taken place at Art in General in New York, Space (untitled) in New Haven, Portland Institute for Contemporary Art, and the Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art. She has been invited to residencies at Fundacion Valparaíso, MacDowell Colony, Yaddo, and the Bemis Center for Contemporary Arts. She was recently awarded an Individual Artist Grant for 2003 by Maryland State Arts. Her work is featured in a number of catalogues and is discussed by photography historian Geoffrey Batchen in his recent book *Each Wild Idea: Writing, Photography, History*, published by MIT Press. She received an MFA from Cranbrook Academy of Art in 1990.

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