



Lyle Rexer, *Positive into Negative*, introduction to exhibition catalogue « Jean-Michel Fauquet - Kairos », Haim Chanin Fine Arts, May 3 - June 30, 2007.

Positive into Negative

The advent of photography marked art's divorce, when eye and hand, body and spirit, no longer communicated directly with one another. The somatic link between imagination and the world was likewise ruptured. The divorce bequeathed us an ocular age, a mechanical age, an age of transparency and surveillance, an age of two dimensions in the real world. At the outset, photographers attempted to reinsert themselves and their physical bodies into the gap. Drawing was the way, the model. The French and English calotypists retouched their paper negatives without compunction, and manipulated the positives, turning the final product into a sum of interventions, gestures even, no longer a mere act of seeing. And so they drew nature, once again, into the circuit of their emotions.

Jean Michel Fauquet's hybrid photographs draw from the same well of need, but with a far greater intensity. The ocular age took dominion everywhere and handwork was slowly but surely purged from the photograph, from its very surface, along with the darkroom itself, in our time. No more alchemy! Give us the evidence! Show us ourselves!

But evidence of what? Only what the eye already knows?

Fauquet provides, instead, the evidence of things unseen, illuminates dark matters, or rather shows us a darkness residing in the field of light's vision. If photography was drawing with light (Nicephore Niepce called it heliography), then Fauquet draws with darkness. He literally works over his prints to evoke the dream dreamt by a positivist, ocular age, a dream of the invisible and the deeply hidden. And the more that the camera exposes to vision, the stronger the desire for unseeable. Recall that it was not fully evident to the early masters of photography what light might disclose, or whether even the human spirit itself might submit to a permanent and incontrovertible record. Scientists themselves entertained the hope. After all, everyone knew what the world looked like, but no one knew what it would look like photographed, or what it was supposed to look like. Black and white? Silver? Why not shades of gray, blue, brown, red, yellow, or even green? Why not negative instead of positive? Today we regard these irregularities as mere artifacts, but originally, they defined what a photograph felt like, its hovering instability.

Fauquet's hand-hewn productions, then, are a kind of spirit photography, reaffirming a deep connection between representational images and the interior world and insisting on a symbolic order for the photograph, a metaphoric order as the basis of any photograph's meaning. The spirit photographs of the 19th century were bogus. Their authors knew they were manipulated, but they played upon a growing anxiety about the cold materiality of the world and a parallel need for the umbilical cord of direct reference.

What are the objects that Jean Michel Fauquet's dark photographs disclose? Pursuing the umbilical metaphor, I want to say that they are birth images, or rather, images about origins, so they at once appear both very old and close to a violence at the beginning of things. This is why they seem uncanny, because, like the photographs themselves, they seem to partake of opposites, of deep uncertainties. The mechanical instruments, which all seem ominous, if not



Haim Chanin Fine Arts

overtly violating, appear so old and unfamiliar that their functions are lost to the past, and yet we recognize, or even remember them. They seem to have originated in a time when science

was in its infancy and its potential for destruction or salvation was unknown. Again, very much like the early spirit of photography.

Likewise the most commonplace things, like a coat over a chair or stairs, are severed from context and rendered new, unfamiliar, monstrous, and old, all at once. This is an archaic experience below or beyond the level of history, not exactly archetypal but always *there*. It scarcely matters that the photographer has organized the whole scene, made it all up. It isn't really him, after all, but something less personal, more demanding. Again, in spite of all the drawing and handwork, the experience must begin with a photograph, rendering the thing available, common, and suddenly familiar. I am reminded of the work of Hungarian Gabor Kerekes, who gave up photojournalism to render photographs of inexplicable objects - a ball nestled in a hole ripped out of sheet metal. And of the work of Fauquet's countryman Laurent Millet, whose photographs of his own stick constructions near ponds and rivers suggest a spurious but disturbing anthropology, bringing us evidence of an unknown civilization that has somehow managed to survive, at least to leave a standing trace.

That's what these works by Fauquet are - traces of things we cannot see, paths in the woods we have never been down, stairway labyrinths we have never ascended and yet know exactly what it would feel like to find ourselves there. Traces of being. The power of these photodrawings is to overcome the dichotomy between absence and presence, between gesture and image and to do away with seeing altogether. We feel, in the presence of these pictures, we are there, somewhere in that dark, and we know with an awful certainty, that we are.

Lyle Rexer
Brooklyn, NY