SAN FRANCISCO

Alika Cooper

ELEANOR HARWOOD GALLERY

In LA's textile district, acres of warehouse space are packed with bolts of fabric shoulder to shoulder in rotund cylinders and flatboarded stacks. Three, four, five deep, they quietly rub against one another—satin sliding against royal velvet brushing cottons rough and fine; patterns of interlocking diamonds and pulsating paisleys clashing with fields of tiny flowers splayed across expanses of beige, for a grand optical performance. Taken at once, this heterogeneous mélange hints at the infinitude of combinatorial possibility. In this spirit, Los Angeles–based artist Alika Cooper rearticulates the photographic form via a kind of "painting" as craft, layering textiles into compositions of landscapes and bodies. Though the handling of fabric usually belongs to the soft domain of women's work, Cooper's images are sourced from compositionally assertive photos shot by men.

Alika Cooper, *Cherried*, 2011, collaged fabric, stretcher bars, 16 x 20".

In "Cherried," Cooper's exhibition at the newly opened Eleanor Harwood Gallery in San Francisco, different, patterned fabrics are pulled across stretcher bars and collaged to form pictures brought together in a profusion of peculiar combinations. Each of the artist's eleven cloth-based "paintings" on view depicts different bodies, all tensely sexualized, in compositions drawn from the work of three classic photographers of the female form: Heinz Hajek-Halke, Helmut Newton, and Brassaï. To make each work, Cooper first tacks a base fabric across stretcher bars and then shapes her compositions by adhering bits of carefully cut cloth to the surface with glue. The resulting soft polychromatics distance the stark black-and-whites of the photos she is referencing. But the material also works in other ways to contrast with the subjects it depicts. The product of a long line of lady crafters, the artist appears to have sheared her material from the prairie dresses of Protestant farmers' daughters. Distinctly feminine, if resolutely chaste, the fabrics broadcast a sense of rural American restraint and oppression. Yet twisted and arced, Cooper's patchworked surfaces of sweet, homespun fabrics (including many pulled from the decades-old rag room of her Oklahoman aunt) give way to the drama of studio-styled models and haute couture.

But though Newton, Brassaï, and Hajek-Halke are all museum-worthy photographers, at least the first two are popular almost to the point of kitsch (what museum gift shop doesn't sell a postcard of its token Brassaï?). Cooper's pictures can perhaps also be understood as a kind of reclaimed Pop. Painters such as Tom Wesselmann and John Wesley come to mind as potential influences, their seductive canvases prefiguring Cooper's particular transcription of the female form. However, through this translation, the narrative often only becomes darker. In one particularly charged piece, *Ditch* (all works 2011), a photograph by Brassaï is channeled through a complex layering of mostly neutered beige and brown patterns. While the original image depicts a couple intimately entwined, in Cooper's version the woman appears under assault, pinned by the man in a crevasse of the abstracted fabric landscape, suggesting not consensual engagement, but rape. This air of violence is present in all of Cooper's constructions; her patchworking of the subject—a breakdown and reassembly of the human form—reveals an ambiguity toward the eroticism of the body. Elsewhere in a work titled *Cherried*, a detail cropped from a Newton photograph of a nude appears so abstracted that the overall body is barely intelligible. Just as easily read as landscape, the bodies of Cooper's paintings offer us images of femininity remapped.

—Andrew Berardini

LOS ANGELES

"Photography into Sculpture"

CHERRY AND MARTIN

Among the most ambitious gallery shows coinciding with the J. Paul Getty Musuem–instigated "Pacific Standard Time" initiative—a sprawling self-study of Southern California's emergence as a significant art hub—is a restaging of an exhibition that originated in *New York*: Peter Bunnell's "Photography into Sculpture," which first appeared the Museum of Modern Art in 1970 and traveled to seven other venues before eventually landing at Otis College of Art and Design in Los Angeles in 1972. (Most of the original objects or similar works by a given artist are included here; a few have been remade for the occasion.) When it was initially presented, the curator claimed the exhibition to be the "first comprehensive survey of photographically formed images used in a sculptural or fully dimensional manner." Indeed, it framed a noteworthy tendency toward photographic applications for then-new art materials such as vacuum-formed and molded plastic, photosensitized canvas, Plexiglas, and "Leisure Turf," among other things, while largely coalescing around the innovative work of LA-based artist Robert Heinecken and his students at UCLA.

It is clear, based on the nearly kaleidoscopic arrangement of the objects on display at Cherry and Martin—some tellingly dated, many surprisingly fresh-looking; a few objects were reconstructed or repaired for the show—that the artists gathered by Bunnell were busy sorting through the overwhelming implications of Minimalism and (especially) Pop, while also hinting at lingering tendencies inherited from Surrealism and Dada, from Cornell and Duchamp in particular. For example, Jerry McMillan's *Torn Bag*, 1968, a lunch sack ripped open to reveal a landscape view, curiously predicts Duchamp's *Étant donnés*, which, though dated 1946–66, actually made its public debut in 1969. (Granted, the former's exacting but whimsical fabrication has none of the latter's creepy scopophilic frisson.) The inclusion of Robert Watts—represented in both the original and recent "Photography into Sculpture" shows with *BLT*, 1965, a small work that literally sandwiches a black-and-white photograph of bacon, lettuce, and tomato inside a Lucite slice of bread—suggested the impish influence of Fluxus. And I couldn't help but wonder if the proliferation of nude bodies, male and female, evidenced a historical kinship with Muybridge's motion studies (see, for example, the women of Heinecken's *Six Figures*, 1968), or simply revealed a more liberated social moment. The hip answer, surely, is both.