

Photographing photographs, to impart new meaning

Anne Collier, in an AGO retrospective, artfully blurs the line between photo subject, photographer and the viewer

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Photography is no truth-teller, and Anne Collier's not the first artist to explore its slippery subjective-objective bait and switch. She has emerged, though, as one of its most attuned critics.

At the Art Gallery of Ontario, which is hosting the first career retrospective of the 45-year-old Los Angeles-based artist, 22 of Collier's coolly heady images line the walls of the fourth floor galleries.

They're recognizable, and not: Stephen Meizel's picture of Madonna doing her best Marilyn Monroe, but photographed by Collier one step removed: As a poster laid flat with its fold-lines showing. Here, Collier erases the false intimacy of the image and puts on view the real distance between viewer and the image, which, ultimately, is a mass-produced object for sale on the cheap.

Making the same point are stirring portraits of Judy Garland and Marilyn Monroe that Collier shot from the pages of a book, its pages splayed flat and earmarked with Collier's multi-coloured stickies.

A keen collector and amalgamator, Collier's practice of representing pop-cultural images from an obvious remove sits within the genre of appropriation, sure; but that's not giving quite enough credit. Collier's pictures describe the tease a photo represents: Of a distance, held up tantalizingly close, but unbridgeable nonetheless. Removed by a further degree, Collier underscores the artifice of intimacy a photograph — especially of the famous — aims to be.

That the vast majority of her pictures are appropriated images of women should be no surprise. Photography amplified the infamous male gaze exponentially, making the art-historical practice of objectification fast, cheap and out of control. This, ultimately, is Collier's subject: The not-so-fine lines between the represented, the objectified and the unabashedly manipulative, and calling their bluff by making it her own.

Anne Collier, organized by the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, continues to Jan. 10.



Anne Collier, Negative (California), 2013
Anne Collier / Courtesy AGO

Collier, an adept collector of old photographic material, found this negative on ebay. It was used to print a California Tourism poster in the 70s, casting the state as an oceanside idyll of liberalism (the woman in the image is naked); re-invigorated through Collier's feminist frame, the image in negative is ominous and aggressive, casting its casual objectification in darkness.