

RICHARD MEYER ON RACE AND PLUTOCRACY

ONLY SKIN DEEP: CHANGING VISIONS OF THE AMERICAN SELF, EDITED BY COCO FUSCO AND BRIAN WALLIS
NEW YORK: ABRAMS. 416 PAGES. \$40.

Only Skin Deep: Changing Visions of the American Self is at once an exhibition catalogue and a collection of key essays on the history of race and photography in the United States. Beautifully designed and extensively illustrated, *Only Skin Deep* features more than three hundred photographs and photo-based works ranging from nineteenth-century slave daguerreotypes and ethnographic nudes to digital photographs, color light-jet prints, and silk-screen paintings by contemporary artists such as Patty Chang, Daniel J. Martinez, and Glenn Ligon.

As both an exhibit and a book, *Only Skin Deep* rejects any single, overarching narrative of race in America (e.g., historical progress, social justice, racial terror) while simultaneously discarding a survey approach structured around discrete ethnic or regional histories. Equally important, the show refuses to prioritize the fine-art photographic tradition over anonymous, vernacular, and mass-cultural images, including pseudoscientific, private, and pornographic pictures of racially marked bodies.

Rather than call upon genre, geography, or chronology as its organizing principle, *Only Skin Deep* is divided into five sections, each of which focuses on a different structure of "racial imagery." The first section, Looking Up/Looking Down, considers how photography has trained viewers to see racial distinction and denigration. Other sections focus on the visual codes of assimilation and passing (Assimilate/Impersonate), on the tension between stereotype and individuality (Humanize/Fetishize), on the representation of racial and ethnic collectivity (All for One/One for All), and on visual nostalgia and the refashioning of the historical past (Progress/Regress). While the exhibition presses quite hard on these thematic distinctions, the book presents them more subtly, through a series of visual portfolios followed by critical essays on related issues, histories, and photographic encounters.

The portfolio for Looking Up/Looking Down opens with a hand-tinted albumen stereographic view (ca. 1860) of a foppish black man adjusting his massive bow tie while an amused white woman looks on in mild disapproval. Titled *The Darkey's Vanity*, this commercial image demonstrates how humor functioned to denigrate, but also to defuse, the spectacle of interracial pairing in antebellum America. Rather than simply indict such photographs as racist, *Only Skin Deep* poses a more difficult set of questions about the historical conditions of their viewing, the nature of the marketplace in which they circulated, and the potential self-consciousness of their makers and models. In her introductory essay, cocurator Coco Fusco describes how "mass-marketed photography in the second half of the nineteenth century made racialized viewing into a form of entertainment. It created a domain for the imagination where fantasies did not have to remain within the boundaries of time, space, law or decorum—but where pleasure was predicated on the awareness of limits and roles."

Only Skin Deep makes the historical archive of photography speak in new ways, in part by situating nineteenth-century daguerreotypes, stereographs, tintypes, and boudoir cards as the "memory traces" of more recent photography and photo-based work. Historically distant and crudely stereotypical pictures such as *The Darkey's Vanity* are placed in dialogue with modern photographs such as Garry Winogrand's 1967 view of an attractive interracial couple walking down a city street while cradling a pair of pet monkeys in their arms. Although separated by more than a century, both the stereograph and the Winogrand picture play off the social taboos that swirl around the black man–white woman pairing, and both manage the potential volatility of that pairing through a kind of visual joke.

In her curator's acknowledgments, Fusco writes that "this exhibition has shown me how and why entire fields of inquiry go untouched, even though the need to broaden our understanding of American culture is widely recognized." Among the "fields of inquiry" that typically "go untouched" by museums and historical societies is the visual record of ethnography—erotic postcards, books, and photographs of indigenous women (and the occasional man) distributed under the guise of anthropological inquiry.

In "Prairie Pinups: Reconsidering Historic Portraits of American Indian Women," Aleta M. Ringlero discusses the resistance she encountered in the process of researching nineteenth-century commercial nudes of Native North American women. Ringlero cites the response of one curator—"We like to forget those kinds of photographs are in our collection"—as typical of the institutional embarrassment and willed forgetting such images typically provoke. Working against this impulse, *Only Skin Deep* insists on bringing these images—originally made for the private delectation of Anglo men—to light within the context of a major museum exhibition, website, and scholarly catalogue.

In a smart move, *Only Skin Deep* situates Vanessa Beecroft's 2001 video *VB48: Palazzo Ducale* near a display of prairie pinups and pictures of topless tribal women from early twentieth-century volumes such as the *Secret Museum of Anthropology* and *A Private Anthropological Cabinet*. For *VB48*, a performance held in the Palazzo Ducale in Genoa, Italy, Beecroft hired twenty-five young women of color and garbed each in an Afro wig, a black microbikini, and gold Manolo Blahnik pumps. As set against the baroque interior and white marble sculptures of the palazzo, *VB48* at once recalls and glamorizes the history of ethnoporn, of impassive black and brown women placed on display for Euro-American viewers.

Only Skin Deep exposes the elaborate repertoire of racial codes and fantasies that have marked the history of photography since the invention of the medium in the mid-nineteenth century. The book demonstrates that we cannot simply read through the surface of the visual image to find the historical reality of race underneath. From *The Darkey's Vanity* to *VB48*, the works in *Only Skin Deep* constitute part of the history of race in America, a history of inequity made over into art, entertainment, pseudoscience, and ethnographic pleasure. □

Richard Meyer is associate professor of art history at the University of Southern California.