



"A Lesson for Bobo" (1995).

COLLECTION OF ANTHONY T. PODESTA

## Dana Hoey's Blatant Subtlety

**R**EADING a description of some of Dana Hoey's photographs, you wouldn't necessarily think: subtle.

In her Directions Gallery exhibition at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, there are a couple of scenes of nude, or nearly nude, female mud wrestlers. Another picture, "Tribeca," features a young, casually naked Asian man slouching on a velvet couch next to an older, fully clothed woman.

Yet subtlety—often to the point of inscrutability—is just what this young artist's work reeks of. Whether you find that subtlety delicious or ultimately frustrating depends as much on your appetite for effort as on Hoey's ability to deliver the goods, i.e., pictorial punch. She's not afraid to make your eyes work for their supper, scrabbling for purchase over her glossy surfaces as you look for some recognizable morsel, some clue to tell you exactly what the heck is going on here.

In these 10 pictures, she doesn't give you a whole lot to go on.

Meticulously staged with models, Hoey's *faux-verité* photos typically deal with the complex dynamics that come into play when groups of women—most often young women and girls—get together. In Hoey's "A Lesson for Bobo," which resembles a scene from some bad 1970s movie, two teenage girls, their backs to the camera and their hands on their hips, confront a third emerging from a public restroom stall with downcast eyes. In "4:03:82" (whose time-code title hints at Hoey's attempts to freeze the evanescent), two bikini-clad girls stand on a beach, their oblique

ance brought on by a complex mix of fear, disdain, mistrust and envy. Like the waves behind them, halted by the camera in mid-tumble, Hoey seems to have snapped the shutter at the precise moment that some kind of poisonous energy is waxing and another, perhaps healthier, vibe is on the wane.

If you spend enough time with her pictures (and it's easy enough not to want to, their meaning is so hermetic), almost all of them feel that way, as though someone's just said, or is about to say, something she will later regret. In a sense, they turn you into a kind of voyeur, but one who's been dropped into an ongoing, ugly psychodrama without benefit of having met the characters or knowing the backstory.

Of course, despite their documentary appearance, they're all fictions, some more obviously than others. Nowhere is the artifice more clear than in the wrestling shots ("Pro/Am" and "Still From 'One Pro, Two Amateurs'"), whose mud-pit tableaux have been obviously set up on a blue plastic sheet in the middle of someone's manicured suburban back yard. In the foreground are mud-caked

bare-breasted women, looking for all the world like an all-girl punk rock band posing for an album cover (shades of the Slits' infamous "Cut"), while in the background can be seen an inflatable swimming pool and potted plants.

Hoey's allusion—to the fact that wild amazon energy lurks even in the most domestic setting—is clear.

When men make one of their infrequent appearances—as they do in "Tribeca" and Hawaii-set "Ui," in which three women crouch on the ground near a man standing in khaki shorts, it is in a kind of role-reversing objectification. The boy-toy subject of "Tribeca" seems to lounge in a state of erotic abeyance, a guest at an off-camera cocktail party waiting for his cue, while the man in "Ui" is visible only from the waist down. In that picture, a blond woman on the right appears to address him, while another stares at—or through—his legs; a third prefers to scrupulously is-

Understandable comparisons will be made between Hoey's work and the enigmatic, staged scenarios of Canadian photographer Jeff Wall, seen at the Hirshhorn in 1997. But Hoey's work—less dramatic perhaps, or at least of a more internalized drama—are closer in spirit to the self-absorbed work of Cindy Sherman and the new wave of such up-and-coming girl-centric photographers as Jennifer Bornstein and Justine Kurland.

It is work that speaks in a coded language of gesture, of the direction of someone's gaze, of the pauses and silences between words that inform and reveal secrets about the ways in which women and girls behave and where they fit in the world. It is work that celebrates a kind of competitive female energy that has sometimes been viewed as self-destructive, but which Hoey and others of her ilk want to reclaim as a kind of power.

As a man trying to interpret Hoey's art, I sometimes felt like I was straining to hear a soundless dog whistle. The ultra-high—some would say inaudible—frequency at which her messages of sexual politics are sent out means that not every ear is going to be able to hear them, but that doesn't mean that you shouldn't at least lean into the silence and try.

—Michael O'Sullivan