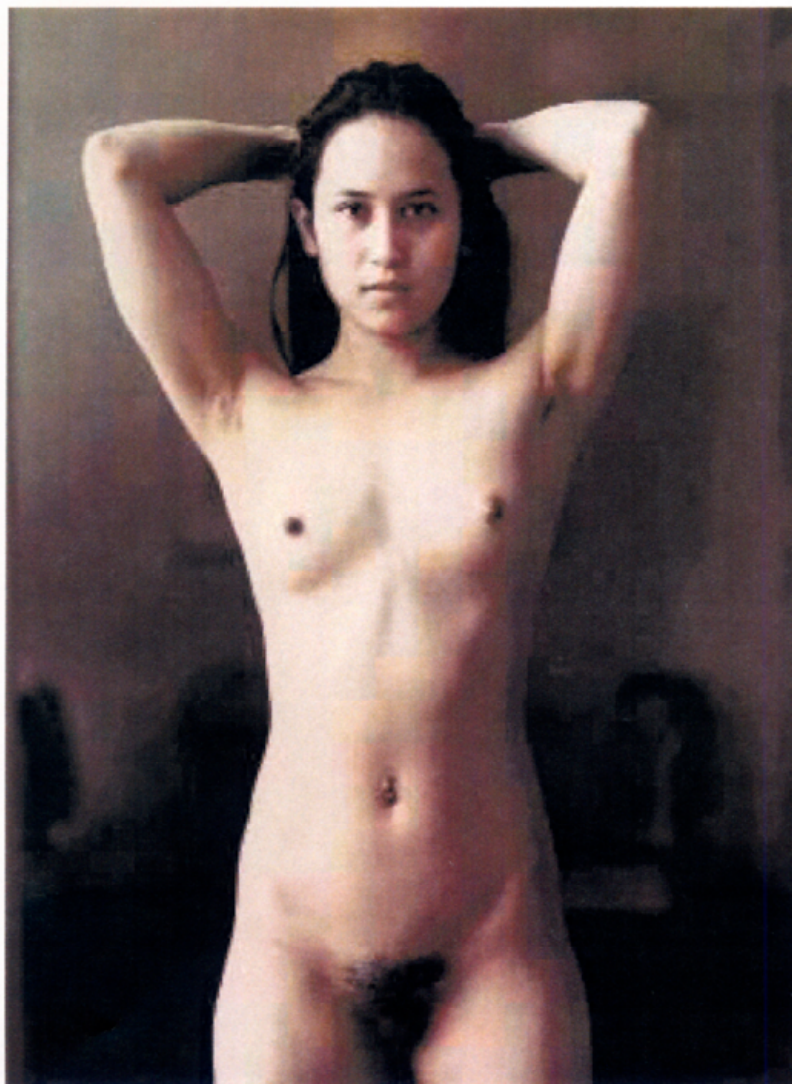


## NUMARK GALLERY

625-27 E Street NW Washington DC 20004  
T. 202.628.3810 F. 202.628.1925  
numarkgall@aol.com www.numarkgallery.com

In a discussion with DENISE WOLFF,  
CHAN CHAO outlines the  
difficulties and rewards of  
photographing the female nude.



Dana Aldis, (above) and Sarah McLaughlin (right) from the book *Echo*. Photographs by Chan Chao. Published by Nazraeli Press, Portland, 2004. 56 pp., 28 four-color illustrations, 11 x 14. Cat# TR168H, \$100.00

## The Reflected Gaze

**"CHAN CHAO'S PICTURES REMIND ME** of why I like art. Addressing his subjects with scrupulous formality, he extends his medium to see and say what there is to be seen and said." Thus wrote Peter Schjeldahl, the esteemed critic and frequent contributor to *The New Yorker*, after seeing Chao's portraits of Burmese soldiers and civilians in the 2002 Whitney Biennial. The

same can be said about his newest body of work on the female nude, which he approaches with his trademark straightforwardness and gentle eye. Though the nude is a far more common subject, it is no less controversial. Chao treads boldly in the minefield of a male photographer capturing the female nude as he traces a long history of meanings assigned to the body and simultaneously unburdens it from its overdetermined legacy. Through the magic of his seemingly neutral approach and his keen use of the medium, Chao negotiates the territory to create nudes at once entrenched with a classical beauty and also working to dismantle the idealized form. *Echo*, the oversized, limited edition book—exquisitely bound with an original C-print tipped onto the cover—showcases Chao's nudes in a fine, understated presentation, echoing the photographs therein.

Just after the election, the Numark Gallery in Washington D.C. hosted a show of his large-scale prints. In Washington—a town generally squeamish with nudity, a town where everything is politically charged—the opening was quite an event. The gallery covered its windows for the duration of the show to protect unsuspecting pedestrians from catching a glimpse inside. But on the rainy night of the opening, what little space was left uncovered on the glass quickly fogged from the talk of the crowd, obscuring any possible view from outside. Much to my surprise, most of the nude subjects are acquaintances of Chao's who live and work in Washington, and many of them mingled about at the opening (clothed, of course). It was strange to look at the images—realistic and larger than life—with the actual living model in the same room. I'm sure that

this type of Heideggerian phenomenon would be fascinating in any city, but in D.C., where you're watched as you watch, the response was palpable because people were noticeably self-conscious in their viewing. Chan's frontal portraits gazed back unabashed and sent many viewers looking for cover and feeling exposed. This might explain why my high-dollar umbrella was stolen that night.

Even as I met up with Chan weeks later at Politics and Prose



Bookstore, people eyed the book as it lay open on the table. We proceeded to have an engaging conversation about his work and new monograph over tea.

DW: You took on a more prominent role in the photo scene after your work on Burma appeared in the 2002 Whitney Biennial and after your monograph, *Burma: Something Went Wrong*. Now you've returned to the nude. How are these disparate bodies of work in dialogue with each other?

CC: I use the same approach in both ... it's very grounded in the portrait. What I want to portray is a directness, using a straightforward pose and neutral lighting. The biggest difference is the politics. The Burma work is obviously a very politically charged subject.

DW: Yes, and the female nude is also a politically charged subject.

CC: When the Whitney curator came to see my work, and I showed him some of my early nudes, he commented that I wasn't afraid to tackle difficult subject matter. In Burma, I wanted to be an artist treating a documentary subject, photographing a conflict as an artist rather than a photojournalist. With the nudes, it's a subject matter that's been done and redone by artists ... a territory with its own "traps." I think this is what the curator meant when he said I wasn't afraid to tackle bold subjects.

DW: Your show of these nudes in Washington opened just after the election and created a stir. A nude show of this scale in a D.C. gallery is bold. What fascinated me was that the Numark gallery covered the windows; in essence, they veiled your nudes. What did you make of this?

CC: With large color prints of nude women on display, we didn't want to encourage gawking from the street that could change the viewing atmosphere inside. Something about Washington responds to the nude differently. It could be that this city's uncomfortable with the nude. I also think the color has something to do with it. If the prints were black and white you wouldn't get the feeling that it's actual skin.

DW: It's easier to read the black-and-white nude as art.

CC: Yes, whereas with color, the photo suggests real skin. And this could mean something out of a pornographic magazine or also a real nude person. The pieces are more confrontational in color.



DW: And I experienced that confrontation differently in the book versus in the gallery. Since the show pieces were slightly larger than life-sized and hung at eye level, I found myself very drawn to the faces, interacting with the nude as if it were a person in front of me. Whereas with the book, even with its over-sized format, I found myself much more body focused. How important is the scale and presentation of your work?

CC: Very important ... integral. I always think of the male viewer and the male gaze as looking at a little images, at miniatures. So I decided to make a certain impact with scale. If I'm going to make nudes and you're going to look at them, what happens when they're bigger than you, larger than life-size? In both the book and the show, these nudes are about being looked at and being looked back at ... having the subject look back at you. I'm hoping the viewer will feel more self-conscious about their looking.

DW: And how do the images create this experience?

CC: I don't want the photographs to be too easily digested. But, at the same time, I don't want them to be garish either.



I want the viewer to be able to move beyond the subject, the nude, and to question him/herself as a viewer. Am I comfortable looking at this or uncomfortable? And why so? Is it me or the subject?

DW: It's interesting that I engaged with the face in the public space of the gallery and with the body at home in the book. Also, as I waited for you at Politics and Prose, I hesitated about having your book open on the table and I became very conscious of where my hands were placed in it. So my experience of the images has changed with each context. And I have been conscious of that experience but also led to consider the act of looking, the politics of consumption.

CC: I'm glad you have spent enough time with these to see beyond the kind of feminism 101 reading.

DW: Well, I think these can be read as problematic because of the domestic setting, which is traditionally a confining space for women. At the same time, the setting here puts the subjects at ease and makes them engaging because it feels like you're in their private space with them, adding a subtle voyeuristic tone to them. Also, the powerful returned gaze subtly conflicts with the domestic background. It's treated deftly. To me, the nudes here seem somehow unburdened by the social baggage or implicit critique they usually bear.

CC: That's what I hope for people to see. I hope that people move beyond post-modernist discussions of portraiture, that they can forget about that. Even if they need to go through that gate or fence at first, I hope they can move past it and think more about their experience of the artwork. There are going to be political issues just because these are female nudes and also because of my own position as a male photographer. When you tackle a subject like this, it will automatically fall into established ideas. I need to be aware of this, but not burdened by it. My intention and perspective are completely direct. This is what I want to show, and this is the result. I think what I want from the subject is the most direct gaze possible. I like to show their comfort level with being nude and being photographed.

DW: ... being made into an art object. I think you bring this out beautifully in the book's introduction where the model writes about her realization that her role was less about the creative moment and more about this ambiguous afterlife as an art object.

CC: Exactly. I like what Susan had to say because it's more rewarding to me to have someone who thinks past being in front of the camera.

DW: And is that gaze for you behind the camera or for the viewer?

CC: Always for the viewer.

DW: Many people have described your work as kind.

And I think this separates you from Dijkstra and Ruff who are doing similar portrait work. Do you consider these images kind?

CC: I like working with a repeated approach like Ruff and Dijkstra, and I like the deadpan component of Ruff's portraits, but I can't shoot like that. For me the subject needs to be a little bit animated and more engaged with the camera. I am consciously trying to be kind because the subject matter deserves kindness.

DW: Is there something about seeing someone nude that disarms us as a viewer?

CC: Yes. The subject has already decided that they're going to be completely vulnerable.

DW: I noticed that from far away these nudes could be seen as idealized, but from up close, especially in the book, you can see imperfections in skin tone, personal grooming, and differences between the made up face and the body. I'm wondering if are you noticing these details during the shoot or if this is something you see later in the print? Are there surprises?

CC: I do notice the smaller details. I think part of my job as an artist is to notice the details that most don't see. But I don't see everything. The exposure process is very controlled. With a view camera, you cannot be spontaneous. So each element has been acknowledged on some level. It's not a fashion shoot or a decisive moment. The process becomes a little bit more like painting, and the product more painterly. And I find more references to paintings. With Beth Saidel, for example, I noticed later in the print that the red chair looks like a shell, making her like Venus and the sea. At

the same time, there are purely photographic surprises; the black on the "shell" was a cat who had wandered into the frame. Sometimes I'm surprised as soon as I show up. I have no way of knowing what a person will look like without their clothes on.

DW: How did the models react to their image?

CC: One thing that I noticed at the opening was that the models who came did not spend too much time looking at their own image. I think they were conscious of being seen as self-absorbed. Also, you can see every detail in the print, and I don't think that they were interested in knowing the exact texture of their thighs.

DW: Right, that's what I'm thinking. The eye doesn't



Carrie Mae Weems

normally see this type of imperfection or texture, but the film records it. So your eye is fairly kind, but the film is absolutely unforgiving. There's a wonderful tension there between your seeing and the medium.

CC: The scale and larger film format allow for detail. I want that detail. I also have control over the medium. I could overexpose these areas so no detail shows. Or I could exaggerate the imperfections by making the print contrastier. I try to keep it as neutral as possible, but allow the medium to show the details it records.

DW: As I looked at this work, I made a mental list of words that came to mind about the images. But I noticed later that my list didn't include the word, erotic. Do you intend for these photos to be erotic?

CC: No. I did not want these images to be erotic. I think it's too easy to create erotic photos. However, since they are nudes, the undertone is always there. And so even though I don't intend for them to be erotic, I do want to create some tension with it, or maybe even discomfort. Some of the things that I've done with Erica Potechin's pose suggest sexuality, and the fact that she's shaved adds a certain edginess, but she has such a baby face. I wanted to exaggerate her face as innocent and her pose as more naughty. So I control this in the image as a way to move past the erotic.

DW: With Erica Potechin, the model holds a classically erotic, even pornographic, pose but the overall image looks less erotic than the Polaroids in the background from the same shoot, which are at a distance from the viewer. There's some kinetic conflict between her facial expression and the pose.

CC: I used to do my early nudes in three sections where I'd put the parts together in a triptych. I photographed the face and then the torso and then the lower body. With the triptychs, the tension was easy to create because I could isolate each area. Now I'm doing that on one frame without physically breaking up the image. The body can present one idea and the face another.

DW: The 4 x 5 medium, which is very slow and exacting, must allow for this. Since the model may be in the pose for quite some time, the face can take on quite a different look.

CC: Exactly. It happens in other ways too. The hand could be delicate, and the face could be stern. Or the body could be aggressive, while the face is accessible. This is the farthest I'm willing to go to create tension or eroticism. I want to stay direct.