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By JAMES PANERO

July 6, 2012 6:00 p.m. ET



Ellen Letcher's "Wrestler" (2012) at Pocket Utopia *Ellen Letcher/Pocket Utopia*

*Ellen Letcher: Photo Still***Pocket Utopia**

191 Henry St., (212) 375-8532

Through July 15

Photography's greatest power is seduction. As a onetime production designer for fashion magazines, Ellen Letcher (b. 1972) understands this better than most. Composed of photographs clipped from glossy publications, her seditious collages pull apart the products she once put together.

This survey show features a decade of Ms. Letcher's work. It also brings together two artists who ran formative Bushwick galleries—Ms. Letcher of the wonderfully named Famous Accountants; and Austin Thomas, whose Pocket Utopia has now relocated to the Lower East Side.

Here Ms. Letcher works to take some of the power out of photography and its use in magazine production by highlighting its fabrication.

Through the introduction of paint, she binds her images to paper and canvas. She also moves her images around, leaving behind outlines where the pictures used to be.

The process might mimic magazine paste-up but doesn't conceal its method of production.

As Ms. Letcher's paint handling has become more sophisticated, her command of imagery has become more authoritative.

By allowing her paint to swirl and carve out space, in works like "Wrestler" (2012) Ms. Letcher takes mass-produced visual culture and reverses it into something of her own.

—Mr. Panero is managing editor of the New Criterion. Peter Plagens is on vacation.

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ESSAYS • WEEKEND

Single Point Perspective: Cardboard in the Dark

by Thomas Micchelli on July 8, 2012

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Ellen Letcher, "Björk" (2009), collaged magazine page and acrylic paint on cardboard, 15 1/2 x 11 1/2 inches (courtesy Pocket Utopia)

In his *Village Voice* season preview for fall 2000, Jim Hoberman predicted that the upcoming premiere of the New York Film Festival would be its “most controversial opening night ever — Lars von Trier’s love-it-or-loathe-it Björk-scored musical tragedy *Dancer in the Dark*.”

When I saw *Dancer in the Dark* for the first time, I found myself loving it and loathing it simultaneously. On the loathing side, the misogyny alone is jaw-dropping, sprinting past the director’s *Breaking the Waves* (1996) in the woman-as-sacrificial-lamb department, to be outdone only by *Antichrist*’s (2009) exercise in woman-as-evil-incarnate.

The intrusion of Björk’s exuberant musical numbers into her character’s headlong rush toward self-immolation seemed disjointed and gratuitous (it took several viewings before these scenes began to make sense in von Trier’s delirious schema). And then there’s the contrived plot, shamelessly jury-rigged for full-tilt emotional manipulation. Put everything together and you should have on your hands a soppy, ridiculous, repulsive mess.

But you don’t. *Dancer in the Dark* ranks among the most gut-wrenching of cinematic experiences precisely because it pushes every button and opens every floodgate, not the least of which is Björk’s feral and febrile performance.

If Björk’s bottomless sorrow, fear and rage anchor the narrative in astonishing emotional versimo, the film’s off-kilter montage takes wing from the very first frame. Each shot, catching bits and pieces of improv, brims with miraculous accidents and the unmitigated joy of movement.

The flamboyance of the filmmaking, drawing together oppositional extremes of melodrama, realism, artifice and formalism, gathers strength as the story moves forward, finally hurtling toward a climax far more apocalyptic than *Melancholia*’s (2011) ultimate *When Worlds Collide* blowout.

* * *

Ellen Letcher’s “Björk” (2009) is a collage composed of a single magazine photo, torn out and pasted onto a bent, unevenly cut scrap of cardboard.

Letcher coats the verso of her collage elements with acrylic paint, which she uses as an adhesive, on the same surface that will become the collage's ground. Therefore, "Björk's" binary composition is comprised of the photo on top and its ghost — an aureole-like aquamarine outline — directly below.

The cardboard has an industrial look, with the word "PANELS" in black block letters inside the aquamarine rectangle. Another word, which is truncated so that only the letters "RA" are visible, appears to tilt backwards in isometric perspective from the painted enclosure.

Like von Trier's montage, the artwork comes off as an aggregate of accidents, with the rawness of the paint, torn paper and cardboard evoking the hardscrabble existence of Björk's character, Selma Jezkova. But the collage's apparent casualness, again like the movie's montage, masks its formal sophistication.

The torn-out paper hovering above the blue-green outline recalls both Mark Rothko and Robert Rauschenberg, drawing together the oppositional extremes of early postwar American art. The abrupt perspectival shift between the letters "RA," pointing toward the upper right, and the angle of the photo, heading for the lower left, is a jam-up that exacerbates the discomfiting dumpster-diving ethos of the materials. A blue metal binder clip suspended from a length of string is all that holds the piece to the wall — a tenuous construct further accentuating the collage's ephemerality.

Which only adds to its intensity. Even if you haven't seen the movie and didn't know the scene in which Selma, condemned to death by hanging, breaks into the most heartbreaking rendition of Rodgers & Hammerstein's "My Favorite Things" you'll ever hear, the collage's torn and stained image — not to mention the cardboard crease running through Björk's fingertips and forehead — acutely conveys vulnerability and despoiled innocence.

We respond with profound emotion to the outrageous plot twists of *Dancer in the Dark* because they speak to the stark, fatal unraveling that can befall us at any moment — despite our efforts (like Selma with her musical fantasies) to shove it out of our minds.

If *Dancer in the Dark* pummels our defenses until we confront our impermanence, "Björk" takes a gentler tack. At a glance, it might register as

an adolescent's discarded fanzine shrine, eminently disposable; a second and third look progressively heightens its psychic charge.

The collage's neo-Povera fusion of the cardboard (the material of Occupy protest signs and makeshift homeless shanties) with the ripped, spattered photo — cheaply printed on thin paper and pasted above a tomblike void — generates a poignancy intertwined with the proximity of its obliteration.

Letcher's "Björk" and Björk's Selma, in their workaday scruffiness, attain an ineffable dignity precisely because they can be so easily tossed away.

Single Point Perspective is an occasional series from *Hyperallergic Weekend* that features texts about single works of art and the currents they ride on.

"Björk" (2009) is on view as part of the solo exhibition [Ellen Letcher: Photo Still](#) at *Pocket Utopia* (191 Henry Street, Lower East Side, Manhattan), which continues through July 15.