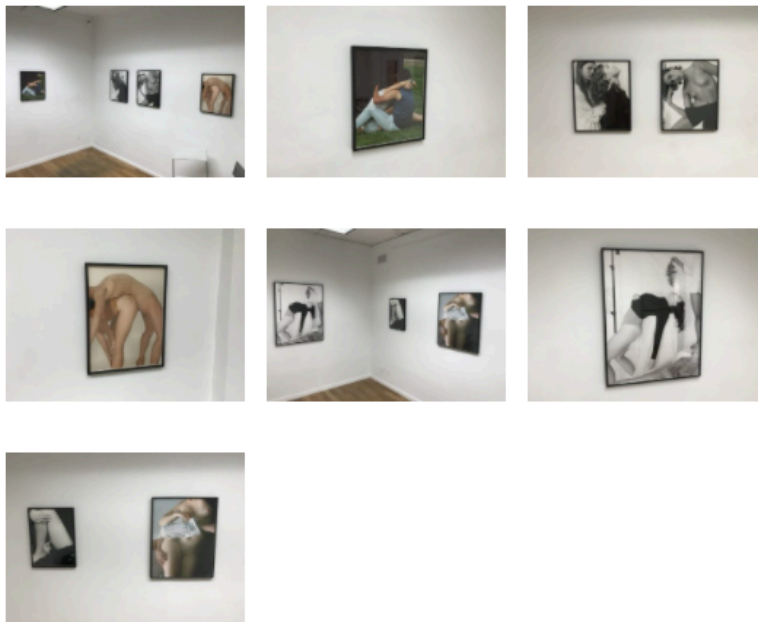


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Jenna Westra, Afternoons @ Lubov

By Loring Knoblauch / In Galleries / October 14, 2020

JTF (just the facts): A total of 7 black-and-white and color photographs, framed in black and unmatted, and hung against white walls in the small, single room gallery space. The works are either gelatin silver prints or archival pigment prints, made between 2015 and 2020. Physical sizes range from 20×15 to 40×30 inches, and no edition information was provided on the checklist. (Installation shots below.) A monograph of this body of work is forthcoming from Hassla Books.



Comments/Context: In the last half dozen years, we've started to see a long overdue reckoning in the photographic female nude. Exhausted (and bored) by the continued dominance of the male gaze, and perhaps encouraged by the MeToo movement, a growing cohort of younger female photographers have taken up the nude (and semi-nude) once again, reclaiming the genre in their own ways. Senta Simond, Whitney Hubbs, and a number of others have unpacked and re-imagined the nude using a range of aesthetic and conceptual strategies, some overtly (and

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gleefully) dismantling the male gaze and others simply ignoring it as irrelevant, placing their own vantage points and perspectives at the center of their artistic investigations.

Jenna Westra's contributions to this reclamation process have now accumulated into a distinct voice. Over the past several years, Westra has actively experimented with the complexities of gesture, as seen in both women alone and in pairs and groups, and in both black-and-white and color imagery. Largely in controlled studio setups (with one exception here in this show), Westra has staked her territory as a formalist, not in the strict Modernist sense of line and shape only, but in a more generous and engaged study of how the lines and curves of female bodies can be the basis of complex photographic composition. If we are in search of a stylistic precedent for Westra's approach, the elegantly interlocked nudes of Jan Groover offer a possible connection, although Westra feels more willing to loosen the constraints of space to include faces and personal interactions.

We don't often think of photographic composition as choreography, but in Westra's case, a dance framework, and the nuances of partnering in particular, seems the most apt way to think about her choices. Westra often uses dancers as her models, and so there is a natural comfort with certain movements and poses, and an innate sensitivity to how bodies move through space and respond to other bodies. Three of the images on view here explore leaning back, from the simple to the elaborate. "Feather Scene" is the most layered, with a central figure leaning back wearing a black long sleeved top, her hair and left arm left to dangle downward. A crinkly black feather is similarly dangled above her head by a second (unseen) person, the feather and the hair of the central woman creating a visual echo. A third model anchors the bottom of the frame, also leaning back, creating a rhythmic refrain. While the scene is clearly staged, the sinuous grace of the central figure balances the more mannered aspects of the arrangement.

"Dancers (Backbend)" introduces more visual uncertainty. One figure bends over, putting her hands on her knees, while a second bends backward, leaning on the first. Both are wearing nude leotards, so their arms, legs, and torsos seem to get intermingled, like an eight-legged human spider or a waterfall of elongated limbs. An untitled work in black-and-white is less abstract, with one woman leaning back toward another woman standing behind her, a touch on the back of the neck providing a gentle sense of trusting support. The contrast of white and black shirts adds to the quiet dynamism of this image, with the tumble of hair providing rich texture in the center.

When Westra pares down to just one figure, she uses contrasts of black and white to help isolate the formal elements she's interested in. In "Arm in Shorts", a pair of black bike shorts provides the active element in breaking up a side bending nude; in "Tights Pinch", the woman's white tights are so invisible in the high contrast setup it looks like the woman is surreally pulling her skin away from her thigh.

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Westra continues this kind of subtle illusionism in “Couple (Rotated)”, where a nude female lies on her side, while a man sits behind her with his leg draped across her midsection. The confusion comes when Westra rotates the frame so it appears that the woman is standing straight up and the man is perplexingly upside down and throwing his white-panted leg upward; it’s a moment of quick reversal, and it works as a mechanism for upending our expectations for a reclining nude. Westra then comes full circle with an image of a couple embracing in the park – it’s a straight image documenting a tender moment on the grass, but given the choreographed images that make up the show, we’re suddenly much more aware of the relative positions of tangled legs and arms. Just when she’s got us seeing formally, she reminds us that elegantly formal arrangements can be found not only in the controlled environment of the studio, but hiding in plain sight.

This is a small and in many ways unassuming show, but there are flashes of sophisticated compositional thinking on view that feel promising. Westra has moved beyond the first level issues that surround the female nude and is now wrestling with more nuanced questions of both form and mood. By creating a comfortable space for women to pose and be posed, she’s uncovering some improvisational forms we haven’t seen before.

Collector’s POV: The prints in this show are priced between \$1800 and \$3300, based on size. Westra’s work has little secondary market history at this point, so gallery retail remains the best option for those collectors interested in following up.

<https://collectordaily.com/jenna-westra-afternoons-lubov/>

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