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The Offset Work of Les Krims: An Interpretive Critique

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In 1981 Les Krims produced an elaborate, limited edition portfolio of twenty silver prints consisting of fifteen black and white photographs slightly enlarged from 8 × 10 negatives, two 8 × 10 color contact prints, and three unique Polaroid SX-70 photographs. He called the folio "Idiosyncratic Pictures," and typified it as his "most ambitious portfolio project to date" and his "most beautiful and effective."¹ The work is visually complex and conceptually ambiguous. In the pristine clarity of large format photography Krims presents a plethora of objects and artifacts placed around and about nude men and women models in a variety of elaborate environments he has built and borrowed. Photographs are photographed in most of the pictures, and several contain various paper silhouettes, predominantly dogs and fishes, but also Victorian ladies and gentlemen, photographers and painters. These cutouts are variously pasted on walls, ceilings, tables, and floors. Also occurring in the images are functional and nonfunctional ladders, gardening tools, small piles of salt, personal hygiene products, model airplanes, mouse traps, cowboy boots, candy and gum wrappers, high heel shoes, large and small robots, toy animals, long dead tree branches, cardboard model buildings, starched shirt collars, arts advertisements, a cardboard cat house, Mickey Mouse, and cameras. Lengthy, sarcastically humorous, typeset titles have been placed within the sets and are photographed as additional information in the images.

The portfolio is highly self-referential in several senses. The most striking reference is to Krims himself. With cable release visible, he presents himself nude in nine of the fifteen images, and uses his name in two of the titles. In using himself as subject he affords himself neither more nor less respect than he affords his other models, and treats his sexuality as publicly and profanely as he treats the sexuality of the women he photographs. The portfolio seems to be built around autobiographical references, but separating fact from fiction is precarious. The folio also refers to itself. Many of the photographs in this portfolio contain other

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photographs from this portfolio. Objects, sets, props, and devices in one picture re-emerge in others. Finally, and most relevant to this essay, the portfolio refers to his older work, and in a sense is a retrospective exhibit of the corpus of his photographic venture. "Idiosyncratic Pictures" is informed by Krims' offset work, and the offset work, in turn, is informed by "Idiosyncratic Pictures."

The pervasive atmosphere of the folio is political. Krims expresses considerable resentment toward the art establishment with sarcastic commentary on the institutional art world in general and the politics of exhibition photography in particular. In the articulation of these particular expressions, a general cynicism about communal human existence emerges and neither Christians, Jews, Blacks, mothers nor lovers are spared Krims' jibes. The more sacrosanct the subject, the more biting is the humor.

As in his main offset works, "Idiosyncratic Pictures" contains highly provocative images which immediately engage the viewer by their power, but which simultaneously frustrate by their opacity. Succinct statements of interpreted meaning are extremely difficult to posit. We are confronted with images difficult to decipher, but which demand the attempt because they are so hard to forget. This article is an attempt to articulate interpretive meanings of Krims' three portfolios, *The Deerslayers*, *The Little People of America 1981*, *The Incredible Case of the Stack O'Wheats Murders*, and his two offset books, *Making Chicken Soup*, and *Fictcryptokrimsographs*, all of which are assumed to be available to readers of this journal. These pieces are not the only offset works by Krims, but are, I believe, his most important by virtue of their wide distribution, subsequent familiarity, and staying power. Krims is a prolific artist, and a frequent lecturer, but it is possibly by these five pieces that he is best known. His other offset work includes:² "Les Krims: 32 Post Cards from the Kodalith Image Series, 1968-1975," published by Galerie Die Brücke, Vienna, Austria, 1976, formerly distributed in the United States by Mythology Unlimited, Inc.; "previews," *Afterimage*, Vol. 4, Nos. 1 & 2, May/June, 1976, which was four pages of the paper with fold and cut lines and instructions for assembling a small book of images, complete with cover, colophon, and so forth. Doubleday also published a slipcased portfolio of gravure reproductions in 1970 entitled "Eight Photographs: Leslie Krims."

I. The Deerslayers (1972)

The Deerslayers has the immediate aura of an anthropological study of deer hunters. It has semblances of scientific objectivity: the human subjects became available for the sampling by stopping at a specific check-in station during a deer season in New York state; by their awareness of the photographer and his camera they offer tacit consent to be part of the recorded sample; and each are recorded with their kill and their vehicle, at a standard distance, from similar angles of view, with the camera usually at their eye-levels. It is as if we were being presented a body of selected information to consider about a common social phenomenon.

The data presented in this study is emotionally gripping and cannot be ignored. But data without interpretation and facts without theory are inherently ambiguous. Lacking any guidance from Krims as to why he selected these facts rather than others available to him about deer hunting, and lacking any sense of what this data means to him or what he would have it mean for us, we are challenged by the power of the images to formulate our own meaning, and decipher our own reactions.

With further examination this folio loses its aura of value neutrality, and its semblance of objectivity begins to dissolve. Any single photograph seems a fair enough treatment, but in experiencing the whole, with its blunt repetition of twenty-five pictures of hunters with their bloody trophies lashed to their vehicles, we are subtly directed toward repulsion rather than affirmation of something in common experience that initially seemed to be presented as gruesome but innocent. Out of all the ritual aspects of the deer hunt, it is apparent that Krims has avoided the wooded countryside in favor of the bleak parking lot, and has chosen to ignore the romance of the hunt in favor of the stark aftermath of the kill. His choice of wide angle lens contributes an unsettling distortion, and the direct flash in the night shots adds eeriness to the eyes of the hunters and the slain. Any semblance of objectivity is finally dissolved when we note in the introductory broadside, which is part of the folio, that Krims is offering a deluxe edition packaged in a brown flocked box containing silver prints plus rifle targets, a swatch of deerhide, a hoof, an antler point, four 12 Gauge deer slugs, and other paraphernalia.

Ultimately we discover that our liberal humanitarian sympathies have been drawn toward the deer and away from the hunters. We are left with the uncomfortable realization that we have an attachment to the animals and a repulsion toward the people.

II. The Incredible Case of The Stack O'Wheats Murders (1972)

The Incredible Case of The Stack O'Wheats Murders is more clearly photographic fiction. Through his selection of models, sets, and props, Krims, in this case, is in complete control, limited only by his imagination. Upon a cursory viewing we quickly realize that the situations depicted are just that--situations depicted. But in depicting these imaginings with a camera, Krims effectively mimicks the photographic tradition of drawing upon the real and satisfies the viewer's conditioned expectations of some semblance of truth in photographs based on the supposed mimetic authority of the photograph.

Besides playing off of our credence in photography, it is also as if Krims is defying societal norms of visual decency: being denied access to forensic photographs by conventional standards of good taste, Krims defies the standards by flaunting photographic simulations of sexual assaults. If our newspapers won't picture what they describe, Krims will.

The pictures have a likeness to how we might imagine police crime lab photographs. But lacking any convincing symptoms of death--rigor mortis has not set in, the blood has not coagulated, nor has the skin the look of death--the pictures have more in common with the sexually violent cover illustrations of *True Detective* magazine. Krims' photographs do not present us with the stark horror of brutal crimes, but rather erotically titillate us with visions of attractive naked women bound in postures for intercourse. The models are too sexual in their vulnerability to arouse feelings of disgust for the perpetrator or pity for the victims. In realizing that this is fiction and that the victims are willing models, we know that the camera is the only weapon used in these crimes, and that the only crime is voyeurism. If horror is evoked it is horror from the realization that we may not be above being aroused and delighted by such pictures. In a criminal investigation of these crimes it is we who are found guilty. If we can rise above such guilt, Krims offers us the chance to create similar fictions of our own through his offer of the deluxe edition of the folio which includes 8 ounces of Hershey's chocolate syrup and pancake mix.

III. The Little People of America 1971 (1972)

The Little People of America 1971 is about a particular group of Americans most noticeably distinct from the majority by the peculiarity of their size. This peculiarity seems a major thrust of the folio. One mature little woman is diminished by the normal furniture of her typical hotel room. Because of the largeness of the chair and the bed in relation to her smallness she will have to struggle before she can relax. Her minimal size is maximized by Krims cornering her from above with a wide angle lens. With an extreme video close-up the television screen at her right shows the contents of an aerosol can being sprayed in her direction by a giant finger depressing a huge nozzle. A normal environment is threatening in its normal size.

About half of the folio has been photographed at the 13th national convention of *The Little People of America* (LPA). In these dwarfs are shown attending their convention just like big people. At a general session they present the year's royal family, they loiter in the lobby, have cocktail parties, dinners, and dances, use the hotel swimming pools, and wander the city sightseeing with cameras and travel brochures.

The other half of the folio contains photographs of the dwarfs in their homes and neighborhoods. There their oddity is not diminished, but their attempt to alter their environments to fit their size is apparent through their selection of low to the floor couches and small lamps, or through their shortening the legs of chairs and tables which results in the mass of furniture being oddly disproportionate to its height.

Some of the photographs seem empathetic in concern: a couple dancing, another couple kissing, a mother cradling her son on the living room floor. Others seem cruel, intentionally composed to heighten the grotesqueness of malformed human beings. Through selection of location, vantage point, and

moment of exposure Krims has managed to depict some of these people as aliens landed from another planet. In almost all of the photographs the people are aware of the photographer, consenting to be photographed, have allowed the photographer to join them in their convention, have invited him into their homes, have brought out family portraits to share, and are willing accomplices in the photographic venture. While they were obviously willing to be photographed, one has to wonder if they were knowledgeable about the results of their generosity in revealing themselves to a sophisticated photographer with a distinct propensity toward the grotesque.

I think that this folio can be understood as functioning in three ways. First as a visual survey of a group of people who are compared with and contrasted to mainstream society. In the comparison they are shown to do all the things their larger counterparts do, and in contrast their physical differences are maximized to the point that their peculiarities result in shock to the viewer. Secondly, the folio can be seen to function as a satire of a minority striving for the goals of the American middle class majority. Thirdly, *The Little People of America 1971* can be seen to function as a satire of the genre of photography known as "documentary." In brief remarks at Ohio Wesleyan in 1976 Krims referred to the dwarfs as "the ultimate minority" and stated that this folio was his attempt to end all ethnic photography. A reinforcement of this particular interpretation of the folio as a *reductio ad absurdum* of the documentary tradition can be found in a do-it-yourself 58" tape measure that is part of the deluxe edition of this folio.

Two other photographs by Krims, which to my knowledge are unpublished, reinforce this third understanding. One of the photographs presents a medium close frontal portrait of a young mongoloid girl with a sign hung around her neck which reads "Diane Arbus Lives in Us." The other photograph is similar in format, and pictures a young Black child wearing a sign which reads "+ stop." The claim of these satires would seem to be that some photographers make their livelihood or fame with minimal amount of effort and skill by taking advantage of the disadvantaged, or in a less *ad hominem* way, that emotionally charged photographs are not difficult to make if the disadvantaged are the subject matter. Ironically, in making these photographs, Krims was serving the dwarfs as their official LPA photographer.

IV. Making Chicken Soup (1972)

Krims produced another publication in that same year, entitled *Making Chicken Soup*. The small book is composed of a sequence of Krims' mother, dressed only in a panty girdle, making chicken soup, step by step, from raw ingredients to the finished dish, in frontal shots similar to stills from a Julia Childs television segment. Included in the book are two recipes, one for kerplach and one for matzo balls, a handwritten letter from "Mom," and a dedication. The dedication reads: "*Making Chicken Soup* is dedicated to my mother, and also to all concerned photographers--both make chicken soup." "Concerned" is the key term in the phrase "to all concerned photographers," and conventionally is used to refer to those concerned with social issues. For instance, The International

Center for Photography uses "concerned photographers" honorifically in reference to Cornell Capa, Don McCullin, Bruce Davidson, and W. Eugene Smith³, each of whom is well known for his commitment to making photographs in support of various humane causes. In dedicating his book to concerned photographers, all of whom make chicken soup, Krims seems to be engaged in elaborate sarcasm pointed at any photographer who would attempt to solve social problems with photographs, as useless an effort as making chicken soup to cure infirmities: both photographs and chicken soup, in Krims' view, are mere placebos.

V. Fictcryptokrimsographs (1975)

Fictcryptokrimsographs is Krims' last offset work to date. It functions best if seen as a compilation of forty singular images of varied formal alterations of Polaroid SX-70 prints. The most apparent alteration is Krims' use of small tools to squish the emulsion before it hardens, affecting both colors and shapes. In several of the images background information is reduced to abstract colored ground to give import to the figures; in some the figures are manually altered with the ground left photographically descriptive; while in others both figure and ground are transformed; five are optically normal but utilize altered sets, and two are collaged. The resultant images are hybrids of painterly and photographic surfaces. In addition to his manual alterations of the photographic print field, Krims here, as in his other fictitious work, employs models, mostly female nudes, and a variety of costuming devices such as false breasts, cosmetic facial mask, and various props ranging from pickles to toy airplanes.

As in all of Krims' offset work his sensitivity to and skill with image placement, typography, paper selection and graphic ornamentation contribute visual vitality to this book. All of the images, reproduced 1:1 from SX-70s, and titles are identically placed with pleasingly proportionate borders that give the volatile images necessary space. On the cover a repeated caricature of the artist with a penis for a nose forms an elaborate border that complements the mottled color of the cover photograph. This same caricature of Krims is repeated for patterned end sheets and is reintroduced in the upper right corner of the last ten pages in a flip-book animation technique.

In this work, as a creator of fictions, Krims extends his options for story telling by his extensive alterations of pictorial space, but what stories he tells are more difficult to determine. Of the forty pictures in the book thirty-seven depict women; in the other three he uses a man, a dog, and a frog. Some of the images have appeared earlier or simultaneously in black and white and untitled: here they remain similar in subject matter but are given different formal dimensions through color, surface manipulation, and titles. Most of the pictures are titled and the titles tend to expand the work rather than interpret it, and usually contribute linguistic humor to the book's pervasive sarcastic, if not cynical, visual

humor. Visual design, humor, and formal alterations unify the work but the content of the form is too strong to allow one the comfort of disinterested aesthetic viewing. While no clearly decipherable overarching theme emerges, there are groups of individual pictures that can be ideationally combined as sub-themes.

Scattered throughout the book are six singular images extracted from larger conceptual pieces. This particular choice of presenting one picture from a series seems an intelligent one as we get the conceptual punch without having to endure the monotonous repetition of similar visual illustrations of the singular idea as would be the case with the political statement of the "Photo-Currency Series: This Image Costs \$1., \$5., \$10., \$20., \$50., \$100., \$500., \$1000., \$5000., \$10,000." which depicts his nude mother standing in a living room set with the various price tags on her forehead. Other single images from series such as those from "Nudes as Airplanes" and "Nude with Vegetables Between Her Breasts," in this context make no immediate sense without additional supporting information which we are denied, unless they are merely to be read as startling in their absurdity.

Several images are overtly phallic and blatantly sexual such as "Banana Monkeyland" which depicts a woman submitting to an onslaught of bananas, one in her mouth and another between her thighs, with a type of overseeing monkey-god in the foreground seemingly in control of the situation. Many of the phallic images are aggressive such as "High Speed Red Shape Impact Image" which shows a long balloon bouncing towards and exploding in the face of a nude woman who bends, with hands behind her back, to meet it. Of the aggressive phallic images some are distinctly militaristic such as "Airplane Attacking Banana Mauraders" and "Super-Ace Attacking Small Creatures In and Out of The Bush." While some, as the latter, are humorous in their unabashed bluntness, others, such as "Holding a French Fry in The Middle of The Face," are grotesque. In these images the women are sometimes in aggressive control, as in "Holding A French Fry..." but usually they are pictured as passively accepting and tolerant of the indignities.

Exposed breasts are present in all but four pictures in the book and are the specific subject of "Goldfishbowl Press and Plug," "Pinhead Breast Displacement," "Baby Boobies," "Wineglass Foot, Breast, Image," "Silver Mountains," and "Erect and Sagging Nails." Some breast images specifically deal with the attraction, or fascination, or obsession that breasts have for Krims, or men, or women, or for American society in general, particularly "Magnified Heat Sources," "The Magnetic Attraction of Juicy Fruit and Doublement," "Rubber Nipple Double Demons," and "Floating Pairs." It is ambiguous as to who is being targeted in the satiric attack about breast obsession. We may want to target Krims himself because of his choice to spend his efforts devising new and stranger elaborations of an already well established recognition of a particular societal neurosis. With his leering self-caricature with a penis for a nose, Krims may be targeting himself, or the generic American male. But in all of the pictures it is women, not men, who are pictured as fascinated by their breasts. If one answers

"women" to the question of who is the object of the satire, a counter answer will be that women are only responding to societal pressure, but I would still interpret the images to be Krims pointing the finger at women who have succumbed to the pressure, and who deserve the results.

The question of satiric targeting can be raised about another set of images with a related theme, those which deal with woman as homemaker, such as "Miniature Dining Room Double Ensemble." An older, black and white image not included in this book pictures a heavy set, nude woman in a living room doubled over in an awkward and compromising position by the burden of a large wedding cake balanced on her back. One could dwell at length on questions of who put the cake there, but it is painfully apparent that all the woman needs to do to release the burden is to stand up. Similarly in "Meatgrinder Triangle Fiction" it is two women who sacrificially mutilate themselves to win the love of a dog. Likewise, in "Broom Optical Illusion," I take it that Krims is implying that the responsibility for the indignities women suffer rests at least in part, if not fully, upon women themselves.

Jewish humor is evident throughout his work and specifically evident in these images: "A Cloned Frog Who Wrote the Word Hitler Before Dying," and "I Get a Headache from Listening to German Sounds." Another theme I find in this book and in his other works is his reference to other art, most clearly evident in "Jism" which I see as a very funny reference to after the bath kinds of paintings by Degas and others of the 19th Century. Other art references are his use of a Georgia O'Keeffe flower painting in one of the set designs for *Stack O'Wheats*, and the Venus reproduction in "Floating Pairs." In addition to these being visual puns, I think they also serve as challenges to our tolerance levels for art with erotic overtones. We are tested by the contrast between what we have accepted as the tolerably sensuous in the work of painters and the crudely sexual in the work of Krims.

Conclusion

In discussing the individual books and folios, the interpretations offered here rest on an understanding of Krims' offset work as if it were raising social issues of ethical import, and as if it were raising critical objections to political and theoretical aspects of the medium of photography and its place in society. This understanding is reinforced by his latest work, "Idiosyncratic Pictures," and that portfolio itself is bolstered by a continuity with these earlier offset pieces.

Social issues run through all the work as exemplified in such pieces as *Deerslayers*, *Little People of America*, and several images in *Fictcryptokrim-sographs*, notably his series on women and their conflict with traditional female roles. His treatment of any issue is complex. Situations are starkly depicted in extremities. The exaggeration of the situations result in our shock in the face of

such overstatements, and our shock in being drawn to laughter in response to such blackness of humor. We are then drawn to face ourselves in the light of our reactions. Sometimes it is the depicted situation which is being made fun of, and at times it seems it is us in our reaction who are being mocked, and often it is both. Krims' visual statements are not of the kind that present clear-cut stances or conclusions which we can readily rally behind or against: ultimate positions to complex issues are always left to the viewer. We may know how to respond and react to Eugene Smith's photographs of victims, but we are left uncomfortable in formulating a conclusive response to the victims of *Stack O'Wheats*.

As pervasive as social criticism in the work, is the criticism of photography itself. If criticisms of photography and theoretical issues concerning our use of the medium are implicit in *Little People of America*, *Deerslayers*, and *Stack O'Wheats*, they are made explicit in such pieces as *Chicken Soup*, "Idiosyncratic Pictures," and in such exhibition pieces as "Piss Portraits." The latter is an unpublished series of photographs depicting Paul Diamond drawing caricatures on the floor by urinating linear portraits of such photography figureheads as Edward Weston, Minor White, Ansel Adams, John Szarkowski, A.D. Coleman and others.

Whatever the subject, whether it be photography, society, or the interface between the two, we can be assured that Krims will present it sacrilegiously, employing sarcastically overstated humor, with the vehemence of a true iconoclast.

FOOTNOTES

1. From the introductory broadside accompanying the portfolio.
2. Information about these pieces has been kindly supplied by Les Krims.
3. See *Images of Man I*, packaged curricular materials subtitled "Concerned Photographers," produced by Scholastic Magazine and The International Center for Photography, featuring W.E. Smith, Bruce Davidson, Cornell Capa, and Don McCullin, 1972.