

# CONSPICUOUS SUBTLETIES

by Glenn O'Brien



Jessica Craig-Martin is a master (or perhaps we can still say mistress in this context) of the dark side of the glamour world and society page society. Ostensibly she provides a service to the couturiers of the corporate age. She is out there dutifully shooting the parties of global glitz, the endless openings, benefits, tributes and fundraisers, as a paparazza on assignment. That's her cover; her covert and principal practice is more aesthetic, more scientific and complex. She is a kind of art sniper, getting in close for the kill shot that will reveal... the horror. Craig-Martin exposes the flab under sheer silk, the augmented breasts heaving out of control, the liver spots on bikini lines, the pre-cancers under troweled foundation, the sequins grating against gooseflesh, the cosmetics on a search and destroy mission, the turkey necks bouncing in rhythm with drop earrings.

Celebrities don't need to be overly concerned about her work. She isn't lined up at the step and repeat entrances to corporate galas, capturing the branded people, the superstars, stars and substars, the celebrities and the celebulards, as they parade and preen in corridors of the logo Craig-Martin works the rooms, and she does so in a pretty dress and heels, passing, when she needs to for a guest. In this way she is a sort of spy, or at least she is camouflaged in her party gear as "one of us." And she is quite capable of doing that job too, catching the fun of the big parties with an eye just as jaundiced as her editor can get

away with.

Her art, however, consists primarily of the unpublished work, the shots that the professional photo editor is perhaps least likely to mark for publication with a china marker. Her art is the X'ed work. And in most of her exhibited photographs you couldn't identify the figures anyway, unless you were an international jewel thief or a society dermatologist. That's because Craig-Martin's framing and cropping abandons the famous face in favor of the telling details. The decapitating crop is humanitarian, almost in the sense that Dr. Guillotine intended with his eponymous device, because it separates the subjects identity from the body of evidence. It's not about the name, it's about the technique behind it: it's about the gemology, about the clothes, about how the paint applied by a celebrity embalmer (heralded make-up artist) sums up the visage for those across the room that look on flesh that's seen far better days and infinitely kinder light.



Craig-Martin's pictures are less portraits than still lifes in the traditional manner. They resemble those old oil paintings which depict, for public agling, the trappings of luxury: the platter overflowing with dead rabbits, shot fat geese, blank-eyed corpulent fish, evicted mollusks, eccentrically anthropomorphic gourds and overripe fruits. The body of evidence usually appears expertly embalmed although never quite sufficiently mortified. The camera is as cruel as the fashion and styling stunts it depicts are vain and ambitious. We see the socialite's world as a House of Wax-- a world so inhuman in its simulation that it attains the status of art.

These are trompe l'oeil people, designed to be depicted by an older, more distant, less

efficient lens. They are giant scrimms of personality, are never intended to be seen in micro detail, only through the soft focus of cataracts, corrective lenses and maximum amplification. These photo opportunists have constructed themselves in bold strokes for blowing up on a screen much larger than real life. All bundled in vermilion and banded with fuchsia, glittering with bold slashes, they appear more like exotic poisonous insects or frogs, rare tropical fish or parasitic and carnivorous flora than human beings. Which is why we find these pictures as beautiful as we do those of the wonderfully in focus, exquisitely stalked, insanely colored insects, fishes and flowers these self-created creatures resemble. Gloved hands gesture, bejeweled fingers point and cosmetic dentistry upstage cultured pearls. These characters are acting out a serial drama as they imagine themselves.

Gossip star reporter of the *New York Post*, Richard Johnson, is caught ecstatic in mid-boogie, obviously cavorting in important company. In *Golden Showers, New Museum Benefit Gala, NY (2000)* we see perhaps the greatest perspective study of shoes ever made, featuring the gilded strappy sandals of two women situated in adjacent toilet cubicles. Amidst the revelry every photo is a revelation. We see snake, crocodile and lizard handbags sitting on the floor next to the Manolo Blahnik of reptilian old bags. We see three degrees of leopard skin in the same frame.



Suddenly the patterns of an Hermes necktie reveal an almost Aztec cruelty. We observe secret fraternal and sororal deathgrips. We contemplate the fact that diamond is the hardest of substances. We feel the mink's pain. We hear the screams of a million unborn sturgeon. Craig-Martin's art is showing people

the way they don't know they look crystallizing that image in a mirror that is ordinarily magically invisible to its double. Which is just how Snow White got into trouble.

When a photographer or artist enters the realm of fashion and glamour it is generally not in the role of a realist. Romantic would be the nice word ordinarily applied, though far worse could be found. Jessica Craig-Martin is that rare practitioner who casts a cold realist eye on the world of organized illusion. She is the invader warned by the *Wizard of Oz*, "pay no attention to that man behind the curtain."

Craig-Martin's pictures remind us that fashion pictures are not fashion. Fashion pictures are not documentations of fashion and its effects. Fashion pictures are catalysts of fantasy, conjuring dreams that give power to cultural fetishes of consumption and waste. They are to consumption what pornography is to sex. The men and women who buy and wear fashion and extreme luxury items resemble the models who display them primarily in their own imagination, but these are the real fashion people.

The world we see here is not about flesh and blood but about illusion triumphant. These people have thoroughly objectified themselves. They are not creatures evolved from DNA but self-made beings of frocks and jewelry, organized in tribes under the totems of corporate fashion. In a way they are artists themselves, stylists and performance artists, shamans from the dark side, assembling each season, each evening, a new personality based on the latest fashion, the latest gossip, the latest data. These characters are the consummation of the consumer society. As incarnations of fashion they are the ultimate modernists. These are the actors and agents of the religion of publicity which finds immortality in the publicity stills of now. These are the true believers. This is what they look like. This is the dream come true, unretouched and untouchable.