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Barbara Astman

BY SARA KNELMAN

Corkin Gallery, Toronto, Canada

In 1980, Barbara Astman – dressed head to toe in black, wide-eyed and smoking against a red studio backdrop, wearing matching nail polish and lipstick – posed for a Polaroid self-portrait that became the cover of rock band Loverboy’s self-titled debut album. As the emulsion dried, she fed the picture into a typewriter and punched song lyrics over the top: ‘Hey LOVERBOY how can I make you love me how can I make you mine how can I make it all when you don’t know what goes on inside...’ The commission, still one of Astman’s best-known images, plays on the disarming questions and visual strategies that have remained preoccupations throughout the artist’s 40-year career. This survey at Toronto’s Corkin Gallery takes stock of her prescient considerations of pop culture imagery, her brave and vulnerable explorations of identity and narrative, and her perpetual experimentation with photographic materiality and technologies.



The Barbara Astman, *I as artifact #4*, 2008-14, archival pigment print, pressed organic face mask, 91 x 91 cm. All images courtesy: Corkin Gallery, Toronto; photographs: © Michael Cullen

exhibition is a rare chance to see a critical mass of Astman's imaginative and pioneering work from the late 1970s and '80s. Among the earliest pieces, the mini anti-dramas of 'Visual Narratives' (1978-79) show figures shifting uncomfortably across a grid of Polaroids, each bearing enigmatic text on its lower edge. 'She

pretended to enjoy herself,' reads one, depicting Astman dressed in a floral blouse, barely distinguishable against flower-patterned wallpaper. The series' diaristic, handmade intimacy expands in *I was thinking about you* (1979) – for which the artist typed letters to friends directly onto developing Polaroid self-portraits, then re-photographed and enlarged them – and again in 'Red Series' (1981), where she appears amidst household tools curiously spray-painted red. We might situate Astman amongst women artists of the 1980s – Cindy Sherman, Lorna Simpson, Carrie Mae Weems or Hannah Wilke – yet there's a specific wit and material curiosity in Astman's work, which borrows not only from cinema and mass media but also from surrealism, fashion and even television soap opera. A great technological innovator, Astman was among the first to experiment with Xerography in the 1970s, and has produced digital scans of dryer lint and facial masks as well as meticulous packing tape transfers of newspaper images.



Barbara Astman,
'The Newspaper
Series', 2006, archival
pigment prints from
stitched
photographs, each
strip, 43 x 290 cm

Though Astman has continued to use her own body – or traces of it – in her work over the years, much of her recent practice focuses less on self-representation than on the media's portrayal of current events. For 'The Newspaper Series' (2006–07), Astman stockpiled a year's worth of newspapers, photographed them in heaps and digitally stitched the resulting images together as 52 separate strips, each nearly three metres long. We might read them as a snapshot of the world at certain moment in time, as selective memories or as a marker of print media's swift decline. In *Daily Collage* (2011), Astman more invasively manipulates media imagery, crafting surrealist collages on the thin, lined pages of a small notebook. Re-photographed and enlarged, we see not only the spreads from each day's work, but the ghosts of the pages before and after. An acute awareness of elapsed time, thought and manual labour is often embedded in Astman's images – though there is a simplicity and agility, too, that comes from the pared down, formal presentations she favours.



Barbara
Astman, *Daily*
Collage, 2011,
archival pigment
prints from original
collages, each 89 x
112 cm

The sense of slow accumulation is everywhere in the gallery; Astman is a great collector of objects and habits, as well as an interpreter of the roles they play in personal or collective histories. Rather than presenting a chronological or thematic overview of Astman's career, the show plays off the conceptual and aesthetic resonances that punctuate these materials. A repurposed mill in Toronto's Distillery District, Corkin Gallery's eccentric architecture – with its grand industrial spaces and quiet nooks – complements the different scales and moods of the images on view: large, museum-worthy wall hangs adjoin more intimate, half-hidden confrontations. Nonetheless, Astman's series are often represented by only one or two works while some are absent entirely, and larger installations aren't assigned the room they require. I left wanting more.

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