

Staring through the Surface at an Elusive Truth

Viviane Sassen's Sense of Image



The composition is deceptively calm. The geometry of shapes and lines comes together seamlessly, weaving a layered texture of frames within frames. A grid of paving slabs, illuminated from above and at an angle, runs diagonally beneath the rhythmic poles of a fence, and provides a supporting surface for a horizontal body, lying concealed among striped shadows of branches and leaves (*Cardinal*, 2004). A man stands on the street, against the backdrop of the space between two houses, and rests a large mirror on the ground. His head disappears behind the upright mirror, while part of his body is doubled, reflected as a mirror image (*Mirror Man*, from the series *Flamboya*, 2004). An interior of a shack, the walls papered with immense Western advertising posters, reveals a view of a street scene in a South African shantytown through the hole that serves as a window (*untitled*, from the series *Cape Flats*, 2005).

Viviane Sassen,
Cardinal (from the
Flamboya series,
2004).



Viviane Sassen,
Untitled/Aisha/Rubedo
(from the *Ultra Violet*
series, 2007).

Fantastic colours, sensual bodies. Strips of brightly coloured prints on African fabrics and Le Coq Sportif-style sports clothing, naked skin, bare arms and legs, all burst out of the picture, in surroundings of dry red clay, sand or rough plasterwork. Colour, skin, form, structure create an exciting texture, where one element dissolves into another and everything becomes connected. Parts of bodies are concealed: by a hole in the wall, a shadow, pieces of clothing, another body. Often the shadow of something outside the picture hides the face from view, the intangible imprint of a branch, a hand, a black shape imposed over the image.

The layered nature of the composition is as complex as it is clear, with a natural sense of incongruity. The chemical interaction of all pictorial elements within the frame possesses its own internal logic. Beneath the surface lies a network of oppositions: fantasy and reality, empiricism and perception, fear and longing, death and sex, light and shadow. The one does not serve to legitimise the other. Everything is intertwined and constantly relating to everything else. Relationships are not fixed. They are connected to the perception, stimulated by beauty and cultural discomfort.

Viviane Sassen,
Mirror Man (from
the *Flamboya* series,
2004).



Viviane Sassen, *Untitled*
(from the *Cape Flats*
series, 2005).

Proximity and unattainability

The proximity of beauty contains a two-fold sense of distance. There is a desire to merge with the beauty, to be as it were astrally irradiated by it. And yet there is a feeling that it is impossible to reach this beauty, and an awareness of its construction. Viviane Sassen's work places this stalemate within a contemporary perspective. Her pictures entice, intoxicate, touch the viewer on a subconscious level. And at the same time they bring viewers face to face with their own projections and with the blind spots in their perceptions, which are inspired by the contextual collective perception from which we derive our way of looking. Those who grasp for stereotypical connotations, reaching out, with a fixed gaze, in search of expected meanings or intentions, may see just what they expect to see, and slide over the smooth surface, untouched.

A woman leans against a car. Her eyes are focused on the mobile phone in her hands. She stands there, casual, relaxed, her feet in flip-flops, one leg crossed loosely in front of the other. Her black skin is covered with red pigment, on her face, arms and legs. Her laid-back stance contrasts with the drama of her dyed red skin. She remains herself, in spite of her red skin and the photographer's attention. Given the absence of narrative clues, we can only guess as

to the ritual significance of the red. It is not easy to see the woman independently of the redness. A comment by Sassen during her exhibition at FOAM (late 2008–early 2009) indicates that this red skin is a reference to *rubedo*, the fourth and final phase in the alchemical process. Is she hinting at an enlightened consciousness in which spirit and matter are one? To what extent is knowledge of the underlying systems of meanings required in order to see a picture and in order to create one? It is perhaps as important as it is impossible. (*Untitled/Aisha/Rubedo*, from the series *Ultra Violet*, 2007)



Viviane Sassen, *DNA*
(from the *Ultra Violet*
series, 2007).

A black man, in medium close-up, stands on the beach with a calm ocean behind him. A large, naked torso, a round head, long, muscular arms, an intriguing expression, resigned, ready. A boy lies draped over the top of the man's head, his head dangling upside down beside the man's larger head. Both of them look into the lens with an obvious resemblance in their gaze and temperament. This double portrait is suffused with an atmosphere of intimacy and continuity, but also an almost oppressive sense of predetermination and the impossibility of escaping one's origins (*DNA*, from the series *Ultra Violet*, 2007).

These are large portraits of real, beautiful people. Enigmatic presences with striking expressions, in semi-informal poses, in a mixture of documentary situation and composed setting. The visual form alludes both to art photography and to contemporary fashion and commercial images. These appear to be balanced compositions in terms of their form and clearly spring from a collective reservoir of imagery. However, their effect is enigmatic – alluring on the surface, but with improbable depths.

Viviane Sassen's photographs suggest an elusive world: a dream reality hiding beneath the surface, associative perceptions residing in the folds of empirical reality. They open a way through to an existence of a different kind, a reality that runs parallel to the pictures in which we exist. Shuttling between consciousness and the subconscious, between being consciously present and not being there at all. Between looking alertly and staring with a wide gaze, with a vast depth of field, so that a detail or a perceived state of mind unexpectedly provides the key for insight, as in a state of staring without distraction, where everything is as close by as it is distant.

This sense of mystery is accompanied by an unpredictable dramaturgy. Different points of focus and trajectories of looking are possible. The bodies of the protagonists create a sense of scale in the pictures. The settings suggest a context that lends meaning to the situations. But the situations and the intentions of the protagonists are unfathomable, partly because we often cannot see their whole faces. Shadows punch holes in our methods of interpretation. Contextual clues are few and are detached from everyday life, events, social and political background. There appears to be no causal dramaturgical division between subject and context. Sassen presents body and situation as an inextricable entanglement of cultural, anthropological, social, psychological and conceptual aspects.

The bodies in the photographs appear to say more about a state of being, a real sense of resignation, than about the life stories of specific individuals. Sassen's bodies offer protection, but they are also all about exposure. They do not represent what the body once was or has been in the past. They draw outlines around an elusive identity and give the perceptive experience a space in which to exist. Sassen's pictures appear to be reaching out for a social psychology that is more likely to reveal itself in an unconscious gesture than in a calculated self-image. They explore the layered nature of the underlying human condition.

From Kenya to Zutphen

Viviane Sassen (1972-) works in a number of different fields. In addition to her work for clients such as Diesel, Nike, KPN, Siemens, the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, UN Studio, her photographs also appear in a wide range of magazines, including *Vogue*, *Blvd.*, *Purple*, *Sec*, *Fantastic Men*, as well as *I-D* and *Frame*, the *Volkskrant's* magazine, and the edgy *Butt*, *Kutt* and *RE-magazine*. She has also done fashion shoots for companies including Miu Miu, SO by Alexander van Slobbe, and Christian Wijnants.

Sassen began her studies in Arnhem, concentrating on fashion. Following

two years of Fashion Academy, which she combined with work as a model, she decided to go into photography. She studied photography at the academy in Utrecht and rounded off her studies at the Ateliers Arnhem.

She exhibits her artistic photography on a fairly regular basis, as she did at the end of 2008 at FOAM in Amsterdam. In 2007, Sassen won the prestigious Prix de Rome for her photographic project *Ultra Violet*, which she created in Ghana. Sassen spends a lot of time travelling in Africa. Her father was a doctor and worked in Africa for a while, and Sassen herself grew up in Kenya. When she was five years old, she and her parents moved from Kenya to Zutphen. While her belief system was formed largely in the Netherlands, her early African impressions have strongly influenced her way of looking at the world. She is drawn to African atmospheres and to African people. Although she feels connected to the place, she is, at the same time, an outsider. The same is true in the Netherlands. This is a significant position for a photographer.

In 2002 Sassen travelled around South Africa. Although she had not visited Africa since she was a child, she immediately felt less inhibited there than she did in the Netherlands. She recognised the atmospheres, remembered very early impressions, and again encountered the concept of parallel realities that she had unwittingly formed at a young age. In spite of her intuitive sense of comfort and security, she still felt the sober and terrifying awareness of never being able to know the other and other cultures.

Most of the work that she did in South African townships in 2002 was of a documentary nature. During the many trips that followed, including visits to Kenya, Ghana and Tanzania, she took photographs based on memories of her childhood. In more recent series Sassen increasingly appears to be composing a mood, a human condition that is hard to describe.

Projecting in both directions

Sassen involves her African models in the shoots in the same way as the Western models she commissions. Interaction forms an essential part of the process. The question is whether her African models truly understand the visual language and the references within which Sassen presents them. This is a question that Sassen's work appears to counter with the counter-question: *'Is that not equally true of Western protagonists and models?'*

In the photographs set in the West, the provocative appearances of the models in Sassen's world will be seen as a self-referential instrument, a critical reflection of the media zeitgeist. Removing the identity of the western models by blacking out the faces in the photographs is a dramatic intervention with enchanting effect – in line with Sassen's exploration of extremes. But when Sassen cloaks the faces of black people in shadow, she appears to be inadvertently taking a political stance. The photographs from her *Afrika* series might even be seen as a counterpart to the images of Africans that we are accustomed to seeing in the West – exploitations of poverty, oppression, misery and dependence, or of exoticism, projections of primeval power, intriguing animism and sexually charged rituals.

Reviews of Sassen's work usually mention the balance of power between the photographer, armed with a camera, and the people she photographs. Sassen's pictures counter insinuations of amorality, as though asking: *'Isn't*

it time to forget about such stigmas and to leave those distorted stereotypes behind? Maybe the people in her *Afrika* series help to remind the viewer of the possibility of seeing these people as formidable, self-confident, unfathomable, attractive, close to the elements, naturally connecting the dream world with reality, accepting death as part of everyday life? That would be pure projection. Scandalous cliché. Perhaps they help to remind the viewer of the influence of the collective subconscious on the perception, and of the contextual determination that no one can avoid.

Sassen once said that she finds black bodies more aesthetically beautiful. This could be seen as a shocking statement. With its note of provocation, the attitude that this statement reveals might be part of her generation's desire to express themselves freely, a wish to say what she thinks without any ethical prudery. But Sassen always tones down her stance in some way, distancing herself from opinions about social issues that she is aware she cannot know everything about. She does not proudly insist on a particular way of looking at things. Her pictures do not follow the fashion for tendentious statements packaged in aesthetically contrived persuasion. Truth is, after all, ambiguous, endlessly varied, extremely subjective and far from comprehensible.

Dormant truths

These photographs are like dormant images, which root themselves in the subconscious, and may be understood only years later: as alchemical reactions of memory, fear and desire, as fragments of subconscious imagery, which, when they are reactivated at an unguarded moment, unleash a chain reaction of associations.



Viviane Sassen,
Untitled (2008).

It is as though, without being able to foresee the possible implications, Sassen is attempting to make visible the inner images that bombard her, and the mental processes that determine her perception – images and processes that cannot be grasped. She appears to give shape to these images within an intriguing situation that she has happened upon, making use of the actions, phenomena, atmospheres that she encounters, which carry her back into her imagination. Her language of choice is atmosphere rather than narrative. Reality is just a starting point. Photography appears to be Sassen's way of confronting the friction between reality and truth.

She goes to great lengths to compose the dream-like reality in the image, using clear cues to direct what she cannot control. She takes risks as she plays the aesthetic game. With unfailing intuition, she explores the unknowable potential, using her instinct to lend proportion to the inevitable absurdity and imperfection as to direct the credibility of the image.

Sassen's images sound out very large concepts, such as universal connection and existential doubt. A desire to be connected to something all-encompassing, in order not to float, not to disappear. A desire for a world that functions outside of the real manner of being. She is motivated by a great sense of curiosity, about the magic of life and its strange beauty – and also by an oppressive fear of death, a fear that death is something lonely and cold. Shadows and closed eyes are references to death. But death does not have the last word. For Sassen, it is not the opposite of life, but an invisible extra dimension of being.

However forceful the intuition, the fact remains that the elusive world beneath the surface is unfathomable. The awareness that we cannot know the other is painful. The realisation that we can never look in a way that is open and unprejudiced is unsettling. The power of the intangible is thrilling.

Wondering, taking impulsive mental leaps and doubting all apparent logic – these processes take the gaze to a place where reason cannot follow, a volatile magical potential that the intellect cannot grasp. It is a deliberately chosen naive perspective. Every point of view that chooses the path of least resistance, moving along patterns of prejudice, will lose its footing. Sassen's sure-fire sense of the image and her sharp sensitivity clear the way for a re-evaluation of exploring the unknowable and of the 'not-knowing' as a virtue. ■

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All photos courtesy of the artist and Motive Gallery, Amsterdam (www.motivegallery.nl).

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