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Mac Adams

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To begin his essay published for Mac Adams's exhibition this past summer, critic David Company catalogues the many allusions to be found in the photographer's work: "detective stories and news reportage, crime scenes and film noir, the Nouveau Roman and the photoroman, movie publicity and film frames, snapshots and high art,



advertising and the still life, voyeurism and exhibitionism, glamour and horror, sculpture and painting, literature and architecture." That sounds about right. The eleven pieces that were in this show—all part of the "Mysteries" series, 1973–80—evince a deep, referential density; sliding between the theatrical and the analytic, the cinematic and the forensic, they are exceedingly familiar but difficult to place. Yet it is always clear what they ask of us: to investigate the pulpy mysteries their scenes contain.

Born in Wales, Adams arrived in the US in 1967 to pursue an MFA. He eventually joined the John Gibson Gallery in New York, and came to be affiliated with artists such as David Askevold, John Baldessari, Bill Beckley, among others, who were then seeking to explore the relationship between narrative and photography. Often these artists juxtaposed written texts or audio recordings with sequences of images. Adams, however, omitted language altogether, opting simply for paired photographs—a before and after—that prompt the viewer to imagine the intervening time: what happened between one shot and the next. The artist has called this elided period a "narrative void," and typically he suggests that some sort of sordid crime took place within it. Take, for example, *Whisper (Diptych)*, 1976–77. In the left-hand image, an elegant woman stares icily ahead, sipping a cocktail as a man speaks

Mac Adams, *The Whisper (Diptych)*, 1976–77, diptych, gelatin silver prints, each 36 7/8 x 40 3/4".

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into her ear. To the right, there is a shot of a man's feet in bed, a fly sitting on the bottom of one foot. How could he not brush that insect away, unless he's a corpse? Incriminatingly, the woman's earring is visible beneath a sheet.

So it goes with *Orian (Diptych)*, 1980, in which, in the first picture, a young girl juggles balls while a man, in silhouette, lurks in the middle distance. To the right, what would be an innocent shot of an unfinished game of jacks is tainted by the presence of a discarded polka-dotted scarf; it is the same scarf the girl was wearing on the left. The relationship between the images is often tenuous, stretched thin, in many cases involving the recurrence of a single object—a menacing clue that links the two images while only hinting at the nature of the crime. In the left-hand image in *Tennis (Diptych)*, 1976, an individual looks at a woman holding a tennis racket. In the second photo, a woman is slumped in a bathtub; we see the back of her head through the translucent sliding shower door. The tie worn by the man in the left-hand photo is now knotted around a towel rack on the wall and the shower door's handle, seemingly locking her in.

The “woman in peril” appears to be Adams's favorite motif, and, given the dates of the work, it is tempting to see this as an ironic deployment of a generic cultural archetype, a Pictures-era effort to expose a convention's ideological substrate for analysis and critique. (Cindy Sherman was making her “Untitled Film Stills,” 1977–80, around the same time.) *Bicycle*, 1977—the only stand-alone image in the show—is shot from behind a curtain of leaves, showing a woman sunbathing alone in a park. All is not well, however, as a sinister hand in the foreground pulls aside a branch. A point-of-view shot, the work seems, on its face, like an attempt to convey the violence of photographic voyeurism by literalizing it, upping the ante by making the viewer obviously complicit in the predatory gaze. Yet the image reads as almost gleeful in its salaciousness. The content is only a ploy to engage us.

Adams made these “Mysteries” to be looked at as such, and in that way, they explicitly draw a parallel between the viewer and the detective. Such an analogy is misleading, however, for the works—marked by blank spots—always resist deduction and reason. In guiding us along the criminal's trail but leaving the case uncrackable, Adams upends the epistemological promise of the detective story, thwarts the idea that the mystery will be solved. He defers the satisfaction of meaning for the pleasure of speculation.

—Lloyd Wise