

Simone Subal Gallery

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B. Ingrid Olson

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From her come a gang and a run

Roxana Marcoci, Curator in the Department of Photography at the Museum of Modern Art, sees Marcel Duchamp's *Tonsure* (1921), a photograph of a five-pointed comet-star shaved from the hair on the back and top of Duchamp's head, as the first artwork that was self-consciously acted out for and mediated through a camera's lens—the origin of a universe. The word 'tonsure' means, at its root, shear or clip. It refers to cutting or shaving all or some of one's hair as a sign of religious humility or celibacy. ("They shave their heads to allow God to see inside," I read on a message board.) There is a great deal of mystery surrounding Duchamp's *Tonsure*. It is not known who administered the tonsure, where it took place, and for what purpose. The identity of the photographer is also unknown—Man Ray is prominent among those mentioned. The form of the comet-star recalls a note of Duchamp's from 1912 describing a near collision while driving with Apollinaire and Picabia in the Jura Mountains in the western Alps. Duchamp describes the lights of an oncoming car as a "headlight child," figurative comets in reverse: beards extending ahead rather than trailing behind. Duchamp's headlight child later appears in his first attempt at *The Large Glass* (1915-1923)—in the form of the bachelors' phallic-barbs—and obliquely in his final major work, *Etant Donnés* (1946-1966), as the crotch-illuminating gas lamp the spread-eagled female form holds aloft, visible through a pair of peepholes. Implicit in Marcoci's argument is the primacy of *Tonsure* as a photograph, not a performance document. *Tonsure* is the first self-conscious photograph because its subject was constructed for a photograph and the camera's operation naturalizes a perverse form—like Jan Dibbet's perspective corrections. Duchamp's comet-star is not obviously beard-first, it only becomes so when you consider it as a haircut in physical space—the comet's nucleus flies away from his face.

What distinguishes *Tonsure* from the self-portraits, figure studies and studio shots that predate it—from the inception of photography through its popular adaptation for private and instrumental use (Hippolyte Bayard to Thomas Eakins)—is the marriage of a knowing assumption of art-making stagecraft, or performance, with experimentation with the medium of photography "itself." For this binary, *Tonsure* typifies a disagreement in the way in which photography is discussed and theorized by critics and historians: that is, photography as a cultural phenomenon without a singular identity, dependent on context against photography as a "legitimate child of the Western pictorial tradition" (Galassi, *Before Photography*, MoMA, 1981, p. 12) with its own essential character. This productive tension explains why *Tonsure* marks the start of the wider ongoing performance-based photographic self-portraiture practice Marcoci identifies—Yayoi Kusama, Hannah Wilke, Bruce Nauman, Cindy Sherman, etc. A beard-first comet is much like the inversion at the core of the photographic process—darkness is required to see light, and because time is an engine rather than a procession of images *Tonsure* seems more startlingly brief than even the photograph's exposure: hair grows quickly and embodies time's natural pullulations, unfoldings, styles, and circuits. That all of this is tied up with role-play—Duchamp's female alter ego, Rose Sélavy appeared shortly after *Tonsure*—is startling. Duchamp's practice as a whole completely anticipates the work of the artists Marcoci identifies.

If Duchamp inaugurated the type of work that B. Ingrid Olson makes, it follows that her work is related to his, however far removed. It seems important, for example, that her boxes sometimes include images of sculptural surrogates of her body, often disarticulated. These surrogates are reminiscent of Duchamp's four "erotic objects," small-scale sculptures related to the casting of *Etant Donnés* trompe l'oeil female nude: *Not A Shoe* (1950), *Female Fig Leaf* (1961), *Dart Object* (1962), and *Wedge of Chastity* (1963)—all of which are molds for or from the form's erotic zones. (Duchamp quipped that the *Wedge of Chastity*—a paperweight-sized vulva-like form made from pink dental plastic and coupled with a bronze wedge precisely cast to fill its slit-like opening—was a wedding present for his second wife, Alexina Matisse: "We still have it on our table. We usually take it with us, like a wedding ring, no?"). In Olson's boxes you see the accumulation, arrangement, and continual re-use of her past work in fragments. Her boxes are dreamlike or filmic: individual pieces

made in different psychological states, months or years in the past, recombine to form fluid but unnatural connections, like cinematic montage or the illogical thoughts of an insomniac. (The modernist form of cinematic montage marries impossibly different spaces and times, layering shots one on top of another rather than side-by-side.)

Olson has a complex relationship with the viewer, her photographs are staged and she often looks directly into the camera's lens. But there is a phasing tension in her photographs. While they are theatrical she often appears genuinely absorbed in constructing her images—it is difficult to look self-conscious rushing into place for a self-timer, or aligning your limbs with a set. This tension, what Michael Fried refers to as the "consciousness of being beheld," was instrumental in the development of proto-Modernist painting in France: painted subjects alone and in groups absorbed in activities (contemplation, reverie, sleep, labor, etc.) without awareness of the viewer, the basic premise of painting—paintings are objects to be beheld. Olson's proposition is a difficult one: Can a female subject meet a viewer-beholder's gaze without offering herself up for the delectation and domination that this relationship historically implies? If she is plainly absorbed in constructing such a picture does this tip the dynamic of power? But *Tonsure*'s proposition was, and is, difficult as well—as were, and are, all of Duchamp's manipulations of the gendered positions in arts production. (*Tonsure* brings immediately to mind both the desexualized masculinity of a priest and the cartoonish masculinity of a pipe.) I do not want to relegate Olson's boxes to the 'sexual politics' category, or to Fried's suspiciously neat 18th-century French painting to outsized contemporary photography domain-shift, but I believe that her boxes, like *Tonsure*, are overwhelmingly concerned with the absorption-incorporation and stuttering denial of the viewer's gaze—a gaze that comes with a lot of baggage. Just as *Tonsure* invites and denies entry (—the chair back extends into the viewer's space but is sharply cut off by the frame; Duchamp's skewed, featureless profile pulls the viewer clockwise into frame around his pipe as a kind of axis), Olson's boxes pull viewers into knots and dead ends of pictorial space.

It is significant that drawings and the act of drawing figure appear most prominently in her practice—albeit often mediated through photography. Drawing is a political medium, the vehicle of mental maps and utopian plans, the selection of which is a passive rejection of other defined media. It is the preparation for and proxy of most "finished" works, and, it follows, a currency of thought and an object of language. For her use of drawing and the specter of montage, her works are emphatically time-based. Her practice is circular: she cannibalizes her past work (subjects, processes, forms, and materials) in the service of continually reconstructing the same deeply ambiguous form: a Cubist-like representation of herself, her working environment, her working process, and "the work." When I visit her studio I don't see evidence of drawings or photographs being made I just see piles of them, made. In fact, I cannot imagine Olson making her work—an odd problem considering her finished work almost always includes images of her making it. For some reason, I am only able to imagine it in reverse, like backwards footage, a cinematic trick that renders movement unnaturally precise or defies gravity. It is almost as if her works are engines that generate the materials that comprise them.

— Thomas Roach, Chicago, October 2013

B. Ingrid Olson (b. 1987) lives and works in Chicago. She received her BFA from The School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Her recent projects include a group exhibition at Simone Subal Gallery and a portfolio of photographs featured in the Fall 2013 issue of cura. magazine.

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