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TALIA CHETRIT / TO BE LOOKED AT

By Thomas McDonough

Talia Chetrit's arresting *Vagina/Vase (Imprint)* (2011) is, among other things, a condensation of her concerns as a photographer. In it, a wrinkled bolt of black velvet, a standard studio prop, has been casually hung against a light wall, which we peek at through a tear in the fabric and glimpse along the left-hand edge of the image. Impressed upon the soft cloth are the lighter marks left by her model, who had sat on it with her legs splayed during an earlier shoot. The image is humorous, punning on the formal rhyme between the narrow gash in the velvet and the imprint of the sitter's

sex, but it is also conceptually dense, exploring the nature of the indexical mark. In its impressions we find echoes of a long history of the human body's trace, from Yves Klein's infamous Anthropometries of the early 1960s – those paintings made with his female “living paintbrushes” – all the way back to such miraculous images as the Veil of Veronica. All gave form to a fantasy of im-mediacy, of an image not shaped by human hands, of a direct transcription of reality; Chetrit plays with that fantasy, offering us this imprint created by the weight of her model seated upon the velvet backdrop and redoubling it through the index that is the photograph itself. We are twice removed, then, from the presence of the female model and as we realize this, the marks left by her behind assume a rather teasing aspect.

Previous page *Modular Nude*, 2011, digital c-print, 25 x 19 inches **Left** *Vagina/Vase (Imprint)*, 2011, silver gelatin print, 30 x 24 inches

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Vagina/Vase (Imprint) derives from another photograph by Chetrit – it is something like the negative of her Vagina/Vase (2011), in which her model sits with her legs spread, a clear channeled-glass vase strategically placed to distort our view of her sex. Again there is a playful humor at work here, in the juxtaposition of sex and studio prop as well as in the mischievous play of visual access and frustration. The deformations of the glass vase recall the kinds of experiments advocated by László Moholy-Nagy's "Vision in Motion", which included an image of a naked pin-up rephotographed through corrugated glass. Vases are a motif often found in her photographs since 2009, when they first appeared in work that reflected her early interest in process-based experimentation (as in Vase with Color Corners or Primary Colors Flashed at a Vase in Water, both 2009); but almost as quickly she began exploiting their possibilities for optical tricks, placing them against geometrical backdrops whose regularity they would warp (as in Vase/Grid, also 2009). The glass vase became something of an analogue of the camera lens, a materialization in the picture plane of this otherwise invisible piece of machinery – it allows the lens to be looked at, and not only looked through. But the vase, in its concavity and receptivity, was also an obvious metaphor for the female sex, its placement between the model's legs another form of redoubling – sex, vase, and lens becoming a sliding chain of signifiers whose logic governs the series. In these works, Chetrit is engaging with a history of modern photography – both in its constructivist and surrealist variants – while being acutely aware of its quality as visual formula. As she has remarked on more than one occasion, elements like vases or hands "have been so widely used in photography's history that they almost lose meaning." Of course, once this allusive vein is opened, the shifting meanings of the form are virtually infinite, so that the 'feminine' vase can just as easily be seen as phallic (as in Drip Vase, 2011) and, by analogy, even the female body itself can assume this form (Handstand, 2011).

Chetrit often titles her works by separating the names of two elements in the photograph with a bar, as in Hand/Sculpture (Modular) from 2011, and that choice – rather than, say, using the conjunction "and" – seems significant. A bar both conjoins and separates, and that ambivalent construction is at the heart of her photographic practice. We sense that most clearly in her sensual play with space and the body, as when we peer at a fragment of the female body through an opening in black fabric (Abstract Nude, 2010), or when we glimpse her studio through the space between her own legs (Studio Through Legs, 2012). Even if the bar is literally absent from their titles, its logic of juxtaposition and partition prevails, and therein might lay the key to the peculiar beauty of her work.

Right top *Nipple/Chain*, 2012, silver gelatin print, 20 x 16 inches
Bottom *Vagina/Vase*, 2011, silver gelatin print, 30 x 24 inches
Opposite *Handstand*, 2011, silver gelatin print, 40 x 30 inches

