

BERNHEIM

CRISTINE BRACHE

Centerfolds

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I looked for videos of Dorothy Stratten on YouTube last night. Included among the clips and documentaries I found is footage of an hour-long ABC television special filmed at the Playboy mansion in November of 1979. Aired during the height of the Iran hostage crisis and shown with commercials and newsbreaks intact, the video is a curiously revealing snapshot of America, a perfectly preserved record of our penchant for collapsing sex, violence and glamour beneath a veneer of over-produced wholesomeness.

By then a Playmate of the month and a Heffner favorite, nineteen-year-old Stratten features prominently in a number of the vignettes that comprise Playboy's Roller Disco & Pajama Party. We see her waving enthusiastically from the passenger side of a red Rolls Royce convertible; we watch her gyrate to Donna Summer's I Feel Love in a bikini and knee socks while balancing perilously in a pair of roller skates; we witness her join The Village People as they perform their song Ready for the 80s, her image a flash of heat and white blonde hair and glossy apricot silk under a flicker of stage lights.

The throb of this second-hand cocaine reverie is interrupted when the program cedes itself to a commercial break: there is a Pepsi advertisement about a family of emotionally available cowboys; a celebrity endorsement for Charlie perfume; a cautionary tale about a man who seems to be consuming too much cold medicine. "The Ayatollah Khomeini has called upon Black Americans to revolt against the US government," an anchorwoman informs us during the accompanying news brief, but the intrusion is only briefly jarring. Seconds later we are teleported back to the mansion, where we watch Stratten sidle up to the evening's tuxedoed MC, a famous gameshow host nearly thirty years her senior. "Richard, do you really like me?" she asks him, her performance of innocent sex-appeal shot through with a maybe legitimate streak of girlish self-doubt. "Are you kidding me?" he answers on behalf of viewers everywhere, pressing his mouth to hers and wrapping his arm around her waist before they vanish into the night together. "I'm crazy about you."

Five months following the broadcast of Playboy's Roller Disco & Pajama Party, Dorothy Stratten was named 1980's Playmate of the Year, an accolade the magazine's marketing team had repeatedly assured us bore none of the sleazy taint associated with the industry's baser publications. In contrast to the Hustler "Honey" or the Penthouse "Pet," the Playmate was presented as evidence that there were still sexually viable but blessedly unspoiled women to be had; women who were sophisticated but innocent, women who were available for everyone to look at, but maybe only for one man to touch. The images that appear in Stratten's Playboy pictorials are particularly successful because they seem to both confirm and belie the public fantasies generated by the magazine's construction of her persona, a 36-24-36 bombshell who listed her turn-ons as "life, love, poetry, and little animals." Simultaneously conveying wide-eyed naivety and a clear understanding of the aesthetics of sexual pleasure, these images leave us wondering who it is that we are actually looking at. Is it Dorothy Stratten, the fictional Venus who emerged fully formed from the waters of Hugh Heffner's grotto? Is it Dorothy Hoogstratten, the teenage Dairy Queen employee groomed to become a sexual commodity by her exploitative pimp husband? Or are the pictures simply evidence of her preternatural gift as an actress, a claim made repeatedly by director Peter Bogdanovich, Stratten's final lover and the man who perhaps asserted the greatest control over her life when he became her primary biographer?

In an interview conducted shortly after being named Playmate of the Year, Stratten was asked who she believed her pictures were meant to appeal to; it's a question that strikes the listener as absurd, mostly because we already know that the answer is everyone. "I'm supposed to be the Playmate for whoever chooses me as their fantasy," she responds, subtly acknowledging that she's already well aware of what it means to be a malleable thing, that she knows we lose control over who we are the moment the image is framed and the aperture shuts, because she can concede that every photograph depicts something posthumous and that the dead have no rights.

Nine months after the ABC special aired, it was clear that Bogdanovich was at least partially correct; Stratten had demonstrated significant crossover appeal in Hollywood, and her performances in a number of small roles showed she had some promise as an actress. Her August 1980 murder at the hands of her estranged husband—the small-time hustler and pimp who saw her at a Dairy Queen and decided he'd found his fortune—propelled Stratten into a different kind of infamy, the kind where tasteful nudes are not enough, the kind that makes people want to see autopsy reports and crime scene photographs, the kind that makes violators and pornographers out of all of us.

I think about the girl in the apricot silk dress asking the gameshow host if he really liked her, of the teenager who loved animals and wrote sad poetry, of the ghost the public can't quite let go of. I think of Heffner and the pimp husband and Bogdanovich, and I wonder what kind of person would want to claim authorship over a twenty-year-old. I hope that it's quiet wherever she is now, that there is finally something that shields her from us. I would say that I hoped we learned a lesson from her, but we haven't; sometimes when we feel hunger for something, it's too hard to calculate the distance between violence and desire.

Alissa Bennett

Cristine Brache (b. 1984, Miami, USA) lives and works in New York, USA. Brache is a multidisciplinary artist whose work examines feminine archetypes and the female psyche through persona, obsolescence, and erasure. Across encaustic painting, sculpture, and film, she foregrounds the power structures that shape visibility, memory, and what endures. She has recently exhibited at Amant, Brooklyn; ICA, Miami; Berlinische Galerie, Berlin; The Bunker Art Space, West Palm Beach. She holds a BFA in Studio Art from Florida State University (2007) and an MFA in Fine Art Media from Slade School of Fine Art, London (2016)

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