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Galleries: Jason Horowitz at Curator's Office, Titouan Lamazou at Adamson

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By Jessica Dawson
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If fashion magazines are barometers of our collective unconscious -- and they most certainly are -- then something's up. The structured American woman circa 1956 wore girdles as impenetrable as her country's postwar ego; the 1970s saw touchable feathered hair and breasts roaming free thanks to sexual liberation and the pill; and the 1980s boom years required women to look like curvy Gordon Gekkos.

Today, '80s-style pumped-up features remain in vogue and in *Vogue*. My *W* magazine tells me that eyes should be ringed in kohl and iridescence, lips shellacked with gloss, and shoulders assuming the linebacker position. Bigger continues to be better -- so long as waistlines remain modest.

All this super-sizing suggests a lost sense of humanity. When advertisers, plastic surgeons and fashion houses sell only the powered up (lips, breasts, handbags, platforms), they create women as armored and intimidating as soldiers.

Two exhibitions on view now at Curator's Office and Adamson Gallery got me thinking about our attraction to the outsize. This pair of seductive photography shows reflects some of the confused and confusing messages we send women -- men, too, for that matter.

Jason Horowitz's solo show "Drag" at Curator's Office speaks as much about expectations forced on American women as it does about the Washington area drag queens that Horowitz photographs. In Horowitz's pictures, swapping genders underscores how sex roles get played out. These glammed-up men enact visions of what women are supposed to be.

For the most part, Horowitz's large-scale, lusciously colored pictures home in on a single feature -- an eye, a knit brow, a mouth -- and explode the scale. The result is a landscape-like expanse of foundation-caked skin or a desert of iridescent eye shadow.

These are rich images, both art-historically and culturally. If ever there was a Milton Avery eyebrow, then "Bella" is it. A drawn-in eyebrow arches over the natural one, effectively erasing the natural in favor of the artificial. Makeup regularizes the eye so that it becomes an abstracted landscape of the kind that Avery might have painted. That sense of expansiveness continues through to each unframed photo's edge.

Take any one of Horowitz's pictures as a microcosm of femininity and you'll face unsettling realities. In "Tyria Iman No. 3," the lips are hard and tough, but also wet and inviting. The doe eye of "Bella" is rimmed by seductive blues and greens, yet Horowitz's camera picks up on the suturelike quality of her false eyelashes. The laserlike focus of Horowitz's images reveals countless contradictions.

Extrapolate from what you see on Horowitz's surfaces and you'll touch on deeper issues facing today's woman. She is required to excel in work and raise happy children. She should be ambitious -- but thoughtful, too. She should wear the pants and the panties. It's no wonder that women and, to a lesser extent, their male mates and friends feel stuck.

Titouan Lamazou

Next door at Adamson, French photographer Titouan Lamazou presents pictures of women that gratify and excite, yet their pleasures come at the expense of reality -- the photographer manipulated every one subtly but extensively.

A former world-class sailor and adventurer who lived on the seas for two decades, Lamazou turned to creative pursuits about 10 years ago. Though he'd studied art in his teens and continued to work while on maritime adventures, it wasn't until 2001 that Lamazou decided to throw himself into art. His assignment for himself: Travel the world, entering huts and ghettos and hotel rooms to draw, paint and photograph as many women as possible.

On paper, Lamazou's odyssey comes off as the perfect job for the artist-cad. In essence, he collects women -- more than 200 of them for this project.

Yet Lamazou's women, selections of which are on view at Adamson, aren't just pretty faces. Some of his women face excruciating circumstances and straitened lives. They are young and gorgeous, as well as old and plain (more often the former, to be honest). These women are prostitutes and journalists, aspiring actresses and army corporals.

A few years into his project, Lamazou gained attention from the cultural arm of the United Nations, which anointed him a UNESCO Artist for Peace in 2003. He was lauded as a champion of female empowerment and gender equity.

I'm not sure that I buy that. But there is certainly a sense of empathy, not just objectification, in the 11 sumptuous portraits at Adamson.

Yet what's most striking about Lamazou's pictures here isn't their subject matter so much as the artist's process. Each picture is made up of 50 to 450 images that Lamazou interweaves digitally into a rich, seamless whole. This allows for an astonishing degree of detail in every picture.

Color, too, is turned way up. Like the collagen lip or the silicone-enhanced breast, color is pumped up to unnatural heights on Lamazou's computer. The pigments startle and attract -- they're close enough to reality not to turn us off, but they're richer than the real world around us.

With all these enhancements, Lamazou's pictures look outstanding. Yet their impossible beauty, like that of a collagen-lipped model, also suggests standards that are too high for real women -- and real

life -- to meet.

Jason Horowitz

at Curator's Office, 1515 14th St. NW, Wednesday through Saturday noon to 6 p.m., 202-387-1008, through March 27.

Titouan Lamazou

at Adamson Gallery, 1515 14th St. NW, Tuesday through Friday 11:30 a.m. to 5 p.m., Saturday noon to 5 p.m., 202-232-0707, through March 30.

Dawson is a freelance writer.

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