

Beyond Athens and Eden:  
The Art of Ariane Lopez-Huici  
by Carter Ratcliff

The subjects of Ariane Lopez-Huici's photographs often prompt a question: why is this person here, in front of the camera? Why would an enormously fat woman present herself, naked, to the lens? Why would a man masturbate for the photographic record? Sometimes one asks: what is the photographer herself doing here? Or, more simply, where is she?

Against the backdrop of a mud wall, a man with a stick is standing. His body is taut, until—as one of Lopez-Huici's images shows—the tension uncoils and graceful curves reshape his limbs and spine. A kind of ecstasy closes his eyes. The camera watches him but he doesn't look back. He knows himself as a physical, not a visual, presence. I don't want to deny what is obvious: bodies are both visible and palpable. Yet Lopez-Huici's photographs of the man with a stick remind us that these qualities are not stable. In our image-saturated culture, the visibility of the body obscures or even erases its physicality. The lens reduces us to images. In other cultures, it lacks this despotic power. Entranced by his own energy, the man with a stick does not present the photographer with a camera-ready self-image of the kind we call a "look." But where did Lopez-Huici find this man?

She takes most of her photographs in the studio. This is the zone of the esthetic, a space that, in principle, could be anywhere. It is interesting to know that Lopez-Huici was born in Biarritz, that she has studios in Paris and New York. However, these facts are not crucial to her pictures of Aviva, Dalila, and Holly, for she photographed them in the unmoored space of the studio. But she could have photographed the man with a stick only in the place where he lives, which, as it turns out, is a village in Mali, the nation just to the south of Algeria. Every photograph presents the problem of the caption. Lopez-Huici's titles give us only the man's name, Kenekoubo

Ogoïre, yet she is willing to talk about him, to explain that he an animist, that his stick beats a tempo for dancers whose masks invoke the spirits inhabiting the Malian landscape.

Asked about Sekou Dolo, the subject of another series of Malian portraits, Lopez-Huici says that he a bird hunter. He wears his cloth cap, with its “beak” and two “wings,” to bring him closer, in spirit, to his prey. Arranged to cover one eye, the cap effects a kind of disguise: as a bird presents only one eye to him, so Sekou Dolo becomes more bird-like by hiding one of his eyes. If we knew none of this, Lopez-Huici’s pictures of Sekou Dolo and Kenekoubo Ogoïre—these studies of posture, gesture, expression, and form—would, I think, engage us powerfully. So we could do without the artist’s descriptions of her Malian subjects. Why, then, does she provide them? Partly to relieve us from the distractions of curiosity. We can’t help wondering who these men are, where they are from, and until we know we may not be able to give our full attention to their images. By supplying, in effect, a set of extended captions, Lopez-Huici frees us to look. And there is a larger purpose to her Malian commentary.

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Lopez-Huici and her husband, the sculptor Alain Kirili, are veteran travelers. During the past few years, they have made several trips to the central regions of Mali, to spend time among the Dogon people. In recalling these visits, Lopez-Huici always mentions their animism, which ascribes an individual spirit to certain places and things. She remarks, as well, on the Dogons’ struggle to preserve their animism against the encroachments of Islam, from the north. Her sympathies are with the Dogon, for animism insists on the primacy of the particular, at the expense of the universal, and so does the art of Lopez-Huici.

Though it is tempting to see Lopez-Huici among the Dogon as yet another European succumbing to the allure of the exotic, it looks to me as if she is drawn to Mali by something familiar and, in a way, reassuring.

Western monotheism has not, after all, completely defeated our own animism. There are traces of it in our habit of attributing moods to weather and virtues to certain substances. Even physicists talk of the noble metals, and the old Latin phrase, *genius loci* or spirit of the place, is perfectly intelligible to us, even if we no longer expect that spirit to be embodied in a nymph or dryad. Early-modern proponents of the picturesque saw “character” and “expression” in certain landscapes. The picturesque may be old hat but its animistic vision still makes sense to us. A stone, a bird, a tree, a building, a piece of detritus on an urban pavement—we have no difficulty seeing or feeling an individual spirit in any of these things. Granted, we rarely dwell on our animistic impulses. Yet we have them, despite the teachings of monotheism, and I think Lopez-Huici should be understood as traveling to Mali to be among people who acknowledge explicitly what is implicit everywhere, even in Paris and New York.

The conflict between animism and monotheism has a counterpart in the standoff between nominalism and what was called, in medieval times, realism. The nominalists believed that there are only particulars: as conceptually convenient as universals may be, they are nonentities and therefore empty. Realists argued, to the contrary, that universals are real things, more real than any particular. In their view, specific objects and individual people are derivative, and thus valuable only as instances of universal categories. This dispute recalls the Platonic distinction between appearances and reality: what we perceive is ephemeral, a veil of contingencies hiding the abidingly real—nor is Plato the only ancient Greek philosopher to reason along these lines. The dubiousness of the perceived world is a commonplace of early metaphysics, and it persists even now, in academic philosophy and in our everyday views of the world.

Not that we show much consistency in these matters. As I said, we are intuitive animists. Yet we are also universalizers, unreflective Platonists habitually appealing to essences, eternal truths, transcendent categories. Talk of national and cultural essences pervades our politics. Our sexuality is

shaped by ideals of an absolutist nature, and we deform our experience of art by falling back on quasi-Platonic certainties about historical periods, stylistic boundaries, and much else. Thus art remains what it became for certain Romantics: a substitute religion.

We cannot call Lopez-Huici a secular artist. She is too responsive to the Dogon and their spirits. Yet she doesn't seek universals. An artist of particulars, she is a nominalist of sorts—and her nominalism makes her sympathetic to the animist's intuition that the divine is not one but many. Alive to Dogon culture, happy to recall its subtleties, Lopez-Huici always mentions its vulnerability to Islam. Here we see the larger purpose of her reminiscences of Mali. Her comments on monotheism's threat to animism are oblique declarations of a love for individuality, which is a distrust of the universal. Thus she gives us a way to see the unity of an oeuvre that, at first glance, looks thoroughly fragmented. In mappable places, she makes pictures of clothed Africans. In the virtual space of the studio, she photographs naked citizens of Europe and America. What's the connection? The Africans illuminate the others, by showing what Lopez-Huici's puts at stake.

Without her commentary, her images of Sekou Dolo and Kenekoubo Ogoïre would be powerful but obscure. Though the artist's remarks about these men and her visits to Mali do not make everything clear, they provide crucial help. Having heard—or sensed—what animism means to Lopez-Huici, one turns from the individuality of her African pictures to its equivalent in her nudes. Yet one doesn't find it in the same luminous state. Among the Dogon, the individuality of the individual person, creature, object, or event preserves its archaic primacy. In European and American culture, individuality is subject to contrary forces. Propped up by rhetoric left over from early-modern times—the ideology of individual rights, self-expression, and so on—it is undermined by monotheism and its universalizing allies: scientism, bureaucracy, the marketplace. So the pictures Lopez-Huici makes in Paris and New York cannot be as

straightforward as the ones she makes in Africa. To show the particular, these Western images must simultaneously dismantle the scaffolding of the universal. In carrying out this intricate maneuver, Lopez-Huici deploys certain ironies.

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Summing up a long history in a phrase, let us say that Titian established the reclining female nude as a major theme in Western art. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a number of painters—most notably Ingres—rendered the theme exotic by presenting the reclining nude as an odalisque: woman as trophy, held captive in the seraglio. Lopez-Huici's *Aviva*, too, is an odalisque—or, anyway, her poses conform to the artifice of that motif: on elegantly arranged bedclothes, a naked woman assumes languorously horizontal postures. Yet she is not an odalisque because, to speak bluntly, she is too fat. Her bulk makes it impossible for her to squeeze into the image of ideal female beauty that Ingres and Titian and many others rendered so perspicuous with their reclining nudes.

Though it is always presented as eternal and unchanging, that ideal never looks the same from one era to the next. Titian's nudes are far too chunky by today's standard, which is promulgated by movies and fashion magazines. Nonetheless, from ancient Athenian times until now, the ideally beautiful woman is always seen—or it might be better to say, is always understood—as slim, not fat. I stress understanding over seeing because Western ideals are so thoroughly conceptual, even ideals of appearance. That is because, as I implied earlier, Western sensibilities yearn to transcend appearances or, if that is impossible, to imbue them with authority of universalizing thought. Thus etherealized by art, the flesh is no longer that of a particular person. It is the clothing of a motif, a universal category, an Idea. The naked becomes the nude. But *Aviva*'s flesh cannot, will not, collaborate in this transcendentalizing project. Lopez-Huici presents her as an odalisque in the ironic mode—though putting it this way gives a wrong

impression. Aviva is not merely a portrait subject. Like all those who appear in Lopez-Huici's photographs, she is an active participant, a full collaborator in the process that generates the image.

When we focus on the abundance of Aviva's flesh, the artist's irony becomes that of her subject, and Aviva's presence acquires a tone of defiance: yes, she assumes the poses of an odalisque, but only to dismiss the ideals those poses serve. However, if we see her flesh not as a spectacle but simply as flesh, as the corporeality of a particular person, irony melts away and the ideal lingers only in a dismantled state. Of course, everyone from Titian to the moment's hottest fashion photographer, not to mention the sculptors of ancient Greece, form a chorus urging us not to see in Aviva anything but the blatant failure to measure up to the ideal. We cannot help but hear these cultivated voices. Do we obey them? If we do, Aviva is excluded from the category of the acceptably human.

Rephrased, this question of one's obedience to the dictates of a standard of beauty turns into the question posed at the inauguration of modern society: who is to be included? Earlier, the matter of inclusion was settled by appeal to ironclad criteria—chiefly those of social status and race. But modernity is inconvenient. Founded on an ideal of equality, it burdens us with the task of deciding, every time we meet another person, if we want to put our egalitarian ideals into practice. Do we want to accord this individual the degree of humanity we accord ourselves? Usually, this question is answered in an unthinking way. Our judgments of others are routine, banal—and then we come face to face with Lopez-Huici's images of Aviva, Dalila, and Holly, and the premises of our habitual responses become visible.

These premises are, once again, ideals, transcendent standards, universal categories. Lopez-Huici invokes them with traditional poses: for women, the odalisque; for men, the warrior. Giving these poses to people too big for them, she confounds the ideals. Though Holly is huge and may well have a warrior's strength, he doesn't have the look of a warrior, as

defined by ancient statues of Hercules and Antaeus or 17<sup>th</sup>-century paintings of the Rape of the Sabines. When Lopez-Huici shows him in poses borrowed from those sources, we feel a dissonance. We have felt this before, while looking at the pictures of Aviva as a reclining nude. The ideal descends, to consider her inclusion, and before it can reject her, she rejects it—and the very notion of the ideal.

Seen from the back, her hair wrapped in a patterned cloth, Dalila Khatir brings to mind the women in Ingres's *Turkish Bath*. More often, she faces forward, revealing herself utterly but not to us—or to us only incidentally, for we see her in a trance of self-revelation. To one degree or another, all the people in Lopez-Huici's photographs are her collaborators. However, Dalila is an artist in her own right—not only a dancer but also a singer and theatrical performer. Thus she enters as a full partner into the project of creating an image. Sometimes her postures suggest the ecstasy of a dancing maenad. Figures of that sort, in pursuit of Orpheus, swirl through any number of academic paintings of the 19th century. There they are girlish and slim, and their passions are always decorous. Hellenistic maenads are not so proper, yet none are as emphatically, idiosyncratically present, in the full flood of feeling, as Dalila. Nothing sustains her but her intense awareness of herself, of her power—physical, emotional, and esthetic—which no standard of propriety could ever contain.

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Lopez-Huici's photographs of Deedee and son Danny suggest Mary and the Infant Jesus. This is a familiar device. Think of Mary Cassatt's beatific pictures of mothers and children. Paul Gauguin transposed the motif to the South Seas. Recently, Gerhard Richter made small, delicate paintings of his wife holding their infant child. Richter's art gives off an intellectual chill. These recollections of Mary and Jesus supplied his oeuvre with a few spots of warmth—or so a number of commentators argued. One could make the

same argument about Lopez-Huici's image of Danny, naked, gazing into the eyes of his mother, the equally naked Deedee. Another photograph shows him in the fetal position, his head resting against her belly. The sexuality of these images is familial without seeming incestuous. Somehow, Lopez-Huici persuaded a mother and son to dismiss their modesty and pose for the camera as if they were clothed—or, rather, as if their nakedness were simply a way to show that they have a close, if not entirely untroubled, relationship.

Mary and Jesus transcend the human condition. Deedee and Danny do not. The subjects of portraiture, they are too specifically themselves to fall prey to the machinery of transcendence. It is impossible to see this mother and son as allegorical figures of the Mother of God and of God the Son, nor can we save Deedee and Danny for allegory by endowing them with the innocence of Adam and Eve. Most of Lopez-Huici's naked people invoke—and dismiss—ideals and essences of classical origin. Thus she shows us the way beyond Athens. Her photographs of Deedee and Danny usher us out of Eden. This is not an exile, for it guides us into the present—where we already are, willingly or not.

If we are not content to live in the present, amid its contingencies, we can transcend them with the help of some essence or absolute or ideal. This is a delusory escape, as we know and Lopez-Huici reminds us with pictures that confront ideals with flagrantly distinctive people. This is her strategy: to confront transcendent generalities with living particulars. As Holly runs—or charges—through the familiar repertory of classicizing poses, his girth and quirky exuberance free him from the heroic ideal. No longer obscured by the generalizing veil of nudity, he is simply naked. Aviva's nakedness dismisses the ideal of the female nude even more decisively. Toshiko and Toni make the same transition from nudity to nakedness—from ideal to individual—and yet this can be difficult to see.

If Lopez-Huici's strategy is to test the general against the particular, then her photographs of Toshiko and Toni put her strategy to the test. For these women conform to contemporary standards of beauty. How can we

look at Toni and Toshiko and not see them vanish into one or another readymade image of desirable bodies? In other words, what prevents these photographs from being seen as pornography—restrained, yes, but defenseless against the gaze that focuses on sexualized variations of the ideal? Such questions are all the more pressing because, as they double the pornographic ideal, these pictures of Toshiko and Toni generate another: the lesbian couple. In the male imagination, a pair of lesbians becomes the metonym of an absolute: an infinitude of compliant flesh.

Here more than in any of her other images, Lopez-Huici challenges our capacity for distinctions. In pornography, bodies assume sexual postures not for each other but for the camera. Is that what Toni and Toshiko do? Viewers must decide that for themselves. An adamantly religious sensibility might insist on seeing Deedee and Danny as Mary and Jesus. Likewise, the viewer intent on porn would refuse to see anything but sexual display in Lopez-Huici's pictures of Toshiko and Toni. This refusal might seem willful, but in fact is it the sign of a certain helplessness: face-to-face with particulars, the porn-seeker is blinded by a banal array of general concepts about sexual desirability. To see through those concepts is not to see Toni and Toshiko as unsexual. On the contrary, seeing them as the particular people that they are is to see their sexuality amplified, intensified, by the individuality that frees them from the ideal in any form.

Idealized, the body is desexualized. Thus the Renaissance conceives a neoplatonic love for flesh turned into marble. That conceptualized love is still intelligible to us, though the obsessively sexualized images that crowd the present are often seen as signs that that we have freed ourselves from the authority of old ideals. This is far from the case. In fact, the ideal—which desexualizes flesh—has been resexualized. The result is pornography and the quasi-pornography of advertising and entertainment. As I've suggested, this proliferation of sexy mages is a further triumph of concept over flesh, of compulsively controlled thought over the capacity for responding to the presence of others.

Pornography is a latter-day picturesque, a standardized linkage between certain thoughts and certain images. See those images or simply think the thoughts associated with them and one becomes aroused. This mechanism, useful chiefly to males intent on masturbation, is among the subjects of Lopez-Huici's *Solo Absolu*. Shown nude and in close-ups that exclude his face, the masturbating man of *Solo Absolu* is in a way as conceptualized, as generalized, as the images that, one supposes, have inspired his erection. Masturbation leads to orgasm only if a certain routine is carefully observed. Thus the masturbator sacrifices possibility to certainty, and becomes anonymous to himself. But only to a degree. The masturbating individual's individuality persists, as it can hardly help doing, and this is the primary subject of *Solo Absolu*. Though he is lost in the sexualized concepts that arouse him, he is present to Lopez-Huici's camera as himself. This suite of images counts as a portrait of a particular person, and thus the artist puts another challenge to the authority of the ideal in the particularly powerful form it has acquired from porn—hard, soft, and virtual, as in the allegory of pornography that sustains consumerism.

Straightforward pornography shows people fucking. So do Lopez-Huici's pictures of David and Cecelia. The difference is in the camera's interest. The pornographer's camera interest is documentary: sexual organs and activities are to be recorded, more or less explicitly, according to the kind of pornography being produced. Thus, as I noted earlier, pornographic bodies are present chiefly to the lens. By contrast, David and Cecilia are present, first and last, to each other. Lopez-Huici's interest is in a way paradoxical: she wants to make an image of her exclusion from the scenes she records.

Of course, this exclusion is only partial. The artist is present as her subjects make love, not as a participant or a voyeur, but as an individual hyper-alert to the boundaries that separate her from others—the boundaries that must be maintained if there is to be anything of value at stake when, like David and Cecilia, we try to breach them. Lopez-Huici is audacious, not

because she makes sexually charged images, but because these images challenge the Western impulse, ancient and contemporary, to isolate sexuality, the better to conceptualize it. Though Lopez-Huici must know of the impulse, she doesn't seem to feel it. Thus all her pictures—whether of Isabella trimming her public or the man with a stick marking the tempo of a dance—are intended to persuade us that everything we are and do is in some way sexual. That is Lopez-Huici's argument, the point of which is not to reduce us to our sexuality, narrowly defined, but to show us the way to the fullness of our beings, in all their specificity.

Bill Shannon is a young man with an extreme curvature of the spine. To move about, he must use crutches. Accepting this necessity, he has invented a kind of hip-hop uniquely his own. In Lopez-Huici's photographs, he displays a virtuosity at once balletic and constrained by his distinctive anatomy. One is reminded that every anatomy is distinctive, and thus imposes constraints. But not everyone is capable of Shannon's astonishing elegance. Illuminated by Lopez-Huici's other photographs, which guide us past the limits of our habitual judgments, these portraits show us no deformation, only form—but not form for the idealizing delectation of the formalist. Rather, Lopez-Huici pictures a body that is equal in its particularity to every other body—and thus, simply, equal. These images of equality advance a certain logic: if we are all equally human, none of us can be denied any degree of humanity. Far from new, this argument must always be renewed. In renewing it so powerfully—which is to say, so seductively—the art of Lopez-Huici finds its purpose.