

## Women on the Verge of Technology

by Aimee Walleston, artinamericamagazine.com

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We are a society that loves our ladies pretty, and also a society that loves to knock down the very same pretty ladies we build up. In 1975, Larry Flynt printed a paparazzi photograph of Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis naked (rather than nude) in *Hustler*. The published images instantly swiped control of Jackie O's image from the woman lionized for her brave, controlled mourning in the wake of the assassination her own husband.

In 2007, Metro Pictures exhibited a film by TJ Wilcox, *Jackie on Skorprios*, that told the story of this event through archival still and moving images of Kennedy Onassis, montaged to create moving images and narrated, briefly and poetically, with what Wilcox call his "syncopated subtitles," (Jackie happily swimming gets the text "at a time in my life when"). In their brevity, these subtitles, which Wilcox incorporates in many of his films, give each image the quality of an elegy. The piece tells the story of what it meant to be Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, possessed of an innocent and ill-fated belief that she would be granted enough respect to enjoy being naked on private property without being scoped out.

STILL FROM JACKIE ON SKORPIOS, 2007. COURTESY THE ARTIST AND METRO PICTURES, NEW YORK

Wilcox's films challenge viewers to analyze their fussy infatuation with images of beautiful, iconic women. His filmic pieces that are the epitome of lush, Baudelairean loveliness, placing him in the realm of contemporary artists—Elizabeth Peyton, Karen Kilimnik—with a neo-romantic bent. Writing in the *New York Times*, Karen Rosenberg said that *Jackie on Skorprios* "does not reveal anything new about its subject, beyond the fact that she was as chic without clothes as with them." Perhaps what the film reveals is less a truth about its chosen subject and more a truth about ourselves: What lurks in the strange American psyche that demands that are feminine idols constantly confess or humiliate themselves?

Saturday, Metro Pictures opens an exhibition of three new films by Wilcox. Two of the films feature famous females, Adele Astaire and Patsy Cline. A third has a trio of narratives iabout fishing, finding an endangered turtle and making homemade L'eau de vie, and seeks to unearth the premise of objectivity underlying most nature films.

Intriguingly, the artist, who has traditionally used Super 8 transferred to digital video to translate the antiquity of analog technologies, has now begun to use IID Digital Video. The artist uses new equipment to film an interview with Deborah Vivien Cavendish, Dowager

Duchess of Devonshire, for *The Heir and Astaire* (2010). The film is Wilcox's ode to Adele Astaire, the late, lesser-known sister and dance partner of Fred. His interviewee, the 90-year-old Duchess, is the last living Mitford sister, the current resident of infamous Chatsworth House, and a relation of Astaire's late husband. The work is not simply a straightforward biopic.

Within the story is a treatise, says Wilcox, "On what it means to fall in love with a culture that is not one's own"—in this case, England, where Adele made a not-very-successful attempt to introduce American-style live entertainment to a British audience. Also explored in the film is the world of fame, and how it changes: "Adele Astaire was originally more well-known than Ginger Rogers-Ginger was at one time looked at as a stand-in for Adele. But her fame came before the movies, so it was a different kind of fame." Celluloid made fame more famous, and seemed to give it staying power.

*L'eau de Vie* (2010) intersects the discovery of an endangered turtle, a historical account of *ukai* (Japanese fishing), and Wilcox's attempt to make pear L'eau de Vie liquor in his backyard "Nature films are created with this objectivity—it's like the camera doesn't exist," says the artist. "You are somehow just magically seeing this event in nature take place." In Wilcox's film, the human hand is manifestly evident, to the point of intrusion. His pear L'eau de Vie begins as he secures a glass bottle over a tiny, baby pear on a tree in the artist's backyard. Timelapse filming documents the fruit growing and ripening inside this glass cage, eventually becoming, by dint of human intervention, too big to remove from the bottle. This classic technique in making pear L'eau de Vie becomes, under Wilcox's lens, a study in the ways in nature bent to both fantasy and artifice.

Rather than engage in the almost-always dialectical argument of analog versus digital, he proposes the idea that "film technologies don't have to replace each other. These technologies should be [assessed by their own merits]. When video first came out, it was not every advanced, so everything looked like an episode of *Cops*." Conversely, High Definition digital video has a unique, strangely mesmerizing aesthetic all its own. Digital has long been forced to emulate an aesthetic-traditional photography. Perhaps a more intriguing option would to treat new technologies as Wilcox treats his chosen methods of filmmaking and his subjects: just let them be themselves.

METRO PICTURES IS LOCATED AT 519 WEST 24 STREET, NEW YORK.