

Josie McDevitt

April 25, 2023

An Analysis of Tamara Lichtenstein's 'Part I'

Tamara Lichtenstein is a 33-year-old Bolivian photographer from Houston, Texas. She specializes in film photography, specifically enjoying shooting with her Contax T3 (DŽAMIĆ). In an interview with Lomography, Lichtenstein states she prefers film photography because “the light and colors you can achieve with film are incomparable to digital.” Most of her work stems from her struggle with societal beliefs of femininity and her feelings of never fully being able to achieve these standards growing up. Her images portray what she always upheld as feminine beauty and what she always desired in herself.

When speaking with Lomography, Lichtenstein describes the theme of her photography as “femininity, light, and love,” which often lends itself to female subjects. Though Lichtenstein has multiple collections with different subjects, I am particularly focusing on “Part I,” as labeled on her website, which captures these female muses and depicts Lichtenstein’s ideal femininity.

I believe Lichtenstein’s practice of film photography is a strategically beautiful choice for her preferred themes. Film naturally has a vintage look to it due to its archaic technology. The images tend to appear softer than digital images because of natural light leaks and graininess. Current-day digital cameras are extremely advanced, capturing authentic colors and sharp shapes with preciseness down to the pixel. The softness of the film naturally creates an aura of femininity in Lichtenstein’s images, especially when paired with her female subjects. The images appear delicate due to the lack of sharp edges, muted colors, and vignettes.

Apart from her technical choices in capturing the images, her subjects are depicted in flowing clothing, lingerie, or in the nude. These model choices also support the themes of femininity, light, and love because it photographs women in vulnerable states. Comfortability in the nude, or close to it, requires respect for one’s own body and being in touch with one’s authentic self. Lichtenstein represents women with drastically different identifications given the way they are dressed and the environment in which they are placed. On one end of the spectrum, she captures ballerinas and, on the other end, she depicts women dressed as strippers. This shows her recognition of different forms of femininity and how she feels she couldn’t connect with any of them despite the broad range. To me, it shows she felt lost in her self-image growing up since her images represent what she always desired to identify with.

One of the first images that caught my eye shows a woman almost shoulder deep in the ocean. As she stares into the camera, her facial features can hardly be made out due to the graininess of the film and the reflection of the light off the surface of the water. Not only do the lighting and colors provide an ethereal visual, but I believe the choice of placing a woman in the ocean is representative of women’s inherent connection to nature. In fact, much of female divinity is based on our connection with nature. Mother nature is believed to uphold the true strength of feminine energy and the ocean is arguably one of the strongest forces of nature, nourishing life within it. This connection between woman and ocean in many of Lichtenstein’s images within this collection portrays the divine power of femininity.

Moreover, another image specifically depicts a woman looking into a mirror while standing in front of the ocean. This represents, more literally, femininity’s connection with

nature. As she looks into her own reflection, she sees the ocean within herself. This idea is pushed further given the fact we cannot see her face, only the mirror.

Another group of images within the collection I found captivating depicts women grasping for or hidden in the shadows of a mannequin. One particular image shows a woman sitting in front of a mirror, in simple lingerie, looking up at a female mannequin. This represents Lichtenstein's internal struggle with self-image. She is unable to identify herself in her own reflection. She looks to the mannequin as the ideal woman with an inability to accept herself as she is. I believe the choice of simple, non-seductive undergarments is essential to this image because it shows a woman in a delicate state. Oftentimes, women are liberated through their sexuality, and this is expressed through their confidence in extravagant lingerie. The choice to clothe this woman in casual undergarments represents her state of innocence and fragileness. The blandness of them, in this particular image, displays a woman lacking spark and confidence.

All in all, I deeply appreciate Lichtenstein's work because it is something my younger self can identify with. In a world that's contradictory about how women should physically express themselves, it is confusing to navigate self-image and find confidence in a form that society may deem unfeminine or, perhaps, too overtly sexual. I have tried to capture other confusing areas of the female experience in my own work, and I can see myself drawing inspiration from Lichtenstein in my future work because of how her images allowed me to self-reflect.

Works Cited

DŽAMIĆ, Ivana. "Femininity, Light & Love: An Interview with Tamara Lichtenstein (NSFW)." *Femininity, Light & Love: An Interview With Tamara · Lomography*, Lomography, 20 Oct. 2016, <https://www.lomography.com/magazine/324653-femininity-light-and-love-an-interview-with-tamara-lichtenstein>.

Lichtenstein, Tamara. "Part I." *Tamara Lichtenstein*, 2020, <https://www.tamaralichtenstein.com/>.