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**A Conversation with
Chuck Close, Dinorah Delfin
and Björn Ressle**



Chuck Close Studio, New York



A king's milk gone sour in the midst of wary delights
Dinorah Delfin, Photograph 2010

By M. Brendon MacInnis

Björn Ressle Art Projects is presenting Dinorah Delfin's show "*Here and Now Only*" photography and painting, with Chuck Close Daguerreotypes in Manhattan, (see Uptown Listings). Dinorah, Björn and the publisher of M stopped by Chuck's studio in New York to talk about the work in the following conversation.

M - Dinorah was telling me you're like her mentor in some ways.

Chuck Close - I've always spent a lot of time visiting studios; it's harder now since so many places are not wheelchair accessible, so it's hard for me to get into studios to see stuff. I'm on eleven boards and I work very hard for young artists. I jury them, I give prizes to them, I've created foundations just to give studio space to them, just to give money to them. I've always been interested in future generations from mine, how they see the issues with which they live, as opposed to when I came up. Now I'm functioning in the art world as an old fart, blue chip, whatever, and you know, I have my feelings about what's going on. A lot of it I like and a lot of it I don't. So to say I'm a mentor or something seems self congratulatory, I'm not doing it as sort of good works. I do it because I'm interested.

M - For the most part, for me, most things I see these days are not very interesting.

Chuck Close - But most of that was always never very interesting.

M - It's like panning for gold; that's the fun part of it [looking at art]. So what's the show you're working on?

Dinorah Delfin - Actually I asked him if he would be interested in being a special guest in the exhibition.

Chuck Close - It's her show. I did a daguerreotype of her. If I have time, I'll do a self-portrait to put in the show. But I just want to help her and facilitate her show. I had my printer print something up for her so she could see what one of her things looks like really big. So that's mentor-ing on some level.

Dinorah Delfin - By the time we reconnected, I started doing photography, it came out of that moment. So I started asking him what he thought of what I was doing and he gave me feedback, and I felt more confident in what I was doing.

M - But you work more into painting?

Dinorah Delfin - This show is mainly photography; I will have one painting, and I do these three dimensional works. I will have one of those also.

M - Aside from the interest in keeping in touch with what's happening today, what is it that brought your attention to Dinorah's work?

Chuck Close - Well, she started emailing me images and I thought her issues were interesting ones and I said, relatively early on, the things that I didn't think were so good in the works. She seemed to want an honest reaction and I didn't want to just blow smoke up her ass, so I told her what I thought and she seemed to care about my opinion and whatever. As the work evolved and changed, I thought we were involved in a dialogue. So then we went to a few things together and looked at other people's work, which was fun, and it developed into a friendship.

M - How would you describe her work?

Chuck Close - Well, what interested me about her work was the unabashed narcissism about making works about herself and controlling the way this intimate... How many people do you show your naked body to? I know her to be a relatively private person, not an exhibitionist kind of person, yet she's making all these images of herself.

Dinorah Delfin - It's different when you are the photographer.

Chuck Close - She's very carefully controlling how she lets the work out. When I take a picture of her she doesn't like it, since she can't control me. I'm going to do my thing and she says, if I did this, it'd be more flattering. I say tough luck. I'm making this image of you, you can control your own body in your work, and I can control it in mine.

M - You did a series of work where you visited themes of violence; is that in the show we're talking about?

Dinorah Delfin - Yeah, definitely. All these works have to do with it. Not so much violence but trying to put together opposites to violence.

M - There's an artist, I don't have his name exactly, he did this life-size marble sculpture that was shown at Art Chicago years ago [DCA Danish Contemporary Art], incredibly beautiful, like a Rodin. But when you walk over and look at it, you realize the subject is actually a woman gutted, like Jack the ripper. Focussing on the aesthetics, he managed to depict the whole scene as something really beautiful.

Chuck Close - There was a good friend of mine who did all these sculptures about camels. She was married to Richard Serra and they were living in Italy. They went to see those incredible renaissance anatomical wax figures, a Botticelli like woman with real hair rooted in the scalp, with glass eyeballs. They find her, and meanwhile, her gut was ripped open. This was the beginning of autopsies, where artists were beginning to look at what was inside the body as well. So here are the guts split open, the vagina split in two, maybe there's a baby in the uterus. And yet, blond hair, blue eyes lying in a beatific position, this is some of the craziest ass shit you'll ever see in your life!

M - The thing I that like is that it's so far off base, really a horror scene, yet it's so beautiful.

Chuck Close - You see the minute you start talking about this artist's work [Dinorah Delfin], you see it so differently from the way I see it...

M - I haven't seem much if it, mostly email images.

Chuck Close - I'm so... one hundred percent a formalist, I don't think about any of that stuff. I don't think about violence, guts. I know it's in there, I know her leg [in the work] is caught in a bear trap and she's standing on top of a beating heart or whatever, but I don't give a shit about any of that, it just helps her work. I don't read the narrative line, myself; I think, whatever she needs to think about to make an interesting work is fine. It's just not something... I know she needs that, to make what she does, but I don't look at it that way. What do you think, what do you see when you look at her work?

Björn Ressle - With the photographic works, it's a mixture of the ideas of violence which she is using, but also the art history.

Chuck Close - The Caravaggio-esque poses, that stuff.

Björn Ressle - When she puts it together, it's surrealistic.

Chuck Close - When you look at Caravaggio, do you think it's about religion or do you think it's about painting?

Björn Ressle - It's about painting.

Chuck Close - Yeah. Religion was the excuse to make paintings.

Björn Ressle - Exactly.

Chuck Close - The excuse to have a naked figure with something going on. That's how I feel about your stuff. You may feel the opposite. You might feel all of that stuff is the point of the picture. To me it's not the point of the picture, it's the excuse to make the picture.

Dinorah Delfin - I know you don't like the narration, but when I see an image, when a story forms in my mind, I create a narrative, that's how I compose the images. Everything is in my mind before I actually begin working on a composition.

M - What's your process? I was actually going to ask Chuck this too. At what point do you decide, okay I'm doing a photograph or I'm using the photograph as a means to do the painting?

Chuck Close - Photographs always used to be... they existed only to serve the making of a painting. In the earliest years, they had no life of their own outside of this. I took one photograph to make a painting from; I'd bracket the shots and try different exposures, but I was making one photograph to make the painting from. When I got involved in using Polaroid, I began to take photographs that were only going to be photographs. They're not going to be used in the making of a painting. Going forward, I guess I was a reluctant photographer. Then I thought, okay, as long as I'm going to be a photographer, I might as well do some things that interest me as photography. The only thing I collect personally are photographs. So I might as well make something that's interesting as a photograph itself, and I've gone on from there. But I know who real photographers are and I don't think I'm one of them.

Dinorah Delfin - I don't consider myself a photographer either. Photography is just a part of it, the study part.

Björn Ressle - It's like Jeff Koons, he's using photography sometimes, but you wouldn't call him a photographer. Well Richard Avedon....

Chuck Close - Let me tell you a Richard Avedon story, it will tell you something interesting. Avedon came to my very first show at Biker Gallery on 91st street in 1968. Okay. He told me years later that he went, and that after he saw my nine foot high, black and white portraits, he went home and blew up all of his negatives. He said, I'm going to take all of these photographs and I'm going to make them look like art. He was very generous about saying that. He said, I never would have done it had I not seen your work. What a photographic image looks like when it's that big; how you confront it, it's different from a regular sized photograph. I thought was very nice of him to acknowledge that. I was very happy to have had that effect.

M - When you collect photography, do you pay much attention to the materials, the paper type, whether it's a digital print?

Chuck Close - Yeah. Well, of all the world of photography out there, I've limited myself to portraiture just because it keeps the scope of my collection down. Do I see photographs that I like better than some of the portraiture I have? Sure. But just to have some focus, I decided to collect portraits. I have a wonderful Man Ray; I have prints as well as photographs. I have a wonderful Cindy Sherman, stuff like that as well. I hope I get some back; they're all in museums.

M - It happened to me that I showed a photographer and he gave me a print after the show, for myself, and the truth was that the image looked better in the catalog than the actual print.

Björn Ressle - That happens, that a work in person is not as powerful.

Chuck Close - What Dinorah is trying to do, be a painter who makes photographs, that issue is very interesting. There's an interesting difference between making a painting and making a photograph. I think photography is the easiest medium in which to be competent, but the hardest medium in which to have a personal vision. Because there's no physicality. There's no touch, no hand; there's no anything else. If a photographer can make an image that you can recognize from across a room as being their work: Mapplethorpe, Cindy Sherman...

Björn Ressle - Irving Penn, definitely.

Chuck Close - Right. And they do that with no touch, no hand, nothing. That is really an amazing thing. So I think it's the easiest to be competent but the hardest to make a personal idiosyncratic statement. On the other hand, in painting, your going to make a lot of bad paintings before you make a good painting. There are a lot of accidental masterpieces in photography.

I used to go to a lab between 13th and 14th street where you could watch everybody's pictures come out of the machine, just like a regular photo lab, boom boom boom; you'd see a hundred pictures come out of the machine in three minutes, they'd just fall out. About one in every 300 or 400 photographs was a great image, fantastic image. Does that the person who sent their negatives to be developed have any fucking idea that they'd made a great image? No. The idea that you can have an accidental masterpiece, that's photography.

No one is going to have an accidental masterpiece with a painting. It's only going to happen with work. It's a very different mind set. You put yourself in a very different position to make paintings and photographs. Especially if you don't think of yourself primarily as a photographer. I think what Dinorah's doing is very interesting as photographs. It's not something she needs to apologize for; to say, oh this will be more interesting if I made it into a painting, I don't think that's necessarily true. They're excellent photographs. But she didn't get to it by trying to take a photograph. Right?

Dinorah Delfin - I was actually thinking of making a painting. So that's how I started doing it.

Chuck Close - They're very much a painter's attitude, a painter's vision. It's almost looks to me like you were constructing actors on a stage.

Dinorah Delfin - Yeah! That's what we did! I think somebody who's a straight photographer, like a real photographer, wouldn't be able to do what I do easily because I use the painting skills that I have. And I don't know if it's because I do a lot of digital manipulation, the shading...

M - So you do a lot of manipulation?

Dinorah Delfin - Oh yeah, definitely!

M - Well, people don't always realize that. I mean, before digital stuff, people thought that if you got the negative, you've got everything. No, the negative is the beginning.

Chuck Close - Right. The digital picture is just the beginning.

Björn Ressle - You spend at least the same amount of time in Photoshop as you do in the darkroom.

Chuck Close - Absolutely! You used to go in the darkroom, you would dodge and burn and use filters and carefully craft an image. Not the first thing that snaps into the back of the camera when you take it. And that's what I love about Dinorah's work; she's collecting imagery, collecting a whole batch of stuff to sort through and then uses the digital process in Photoshop to build an image. She's not taking an image.

Dinorah Delfin - There is first one image that requires a process, because I'm looking for certain expressions, certain positions, and then after I get that, I have a second image that I play together with.

Björn Ressle - Are you collecting from history as well?

Dinorah Delfin - Yes.

Chuck Close - Well, you've talked to me more about painters than you have about photographers.

Dinorah Delfin - What I started doing was, because of researching Francis Bacon, I saw the image that reminded me of how I felt when I saw a Francis Bacon painting. That's how I started to express this feeling that I had.

M - Is there anything that we can look at here?

Dinorah Delfin - [Takes prints out to show]

Chuck Close - Hold it up in the light. It looks so different in the light. M

Editor's. Note:

The second part of our conversation moves on to discuss other topics in the art world, such as the Whitney Museum of American Art 2010 Whitney Biennial, in the context of past shows, and the recent art fairs that took place in New York during the March "Art Week". This will be published in next month's issue of M.