

Body of Light

by Jean-Paul Bourdier

On Exhibit: February 11 – December 17, 2010
Opening Reception: February 11, 2010 | 5:00 pm



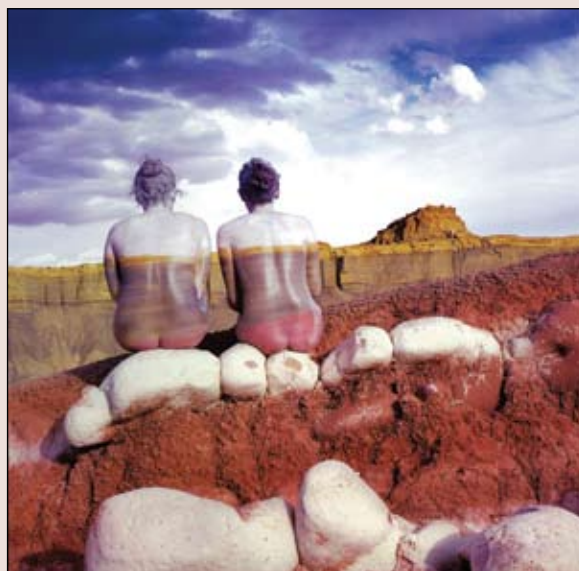
The body is a most intimate house. In West African societies, people decorate their house facades and interiors the way they decorate their own skin, spending long hours, days or even months cutting into its surface, painting it and changing its nature like sculptors. The four elements of the universe—air, earth, water, light—that define people’s houses are also the very elements that define the human body, on which light materializes as paint.

In working with the bare and painted body, I am also working with the demands and challenges of a body-mind state that I call “not two.” For example, without clothes the body regains its undivided primary nature, being intricately part of the forces of the universe; it is no longer estranged from the environment nor split into an upper and a lower part (the two categories that tend to maintain a hierarchy of spirit over matter in our world view). As “not two,” it is similar to the grain of sand (again the

primary unit, here of the earth)—sand being a material I have long worked with (since 1975 until recently) in my sculptural and photographic work. Bare, exposed and yet culturally painted, the body functions as an intimate interface through which the forms and colors of an *internal* bodyscape is *externalized* accordingly, in relation to those of the exterior landscape. The visual works I come up with are thus a continual study of how we relate to this universe from the specific, intimate bodyhouse.

Images of painted bodies show their presences as unique and yet as changeable as the colors of the desert and the reflections of sky and water. As I conceive it, skin painting marks a person’s external appearance while also bringing out the inner self. Turning the skin into a canvas for the imagination is both an artistic and a spiritual endeavor. Through the painted look, a body is transformed into a living sculpture, lit up by its godly colors and awaked to its potential to tune in or become an extension of the cosmos.

My photographic work focuses on the geometries generated by the body as a determinant of “negative



space”—not the background of the figure and the field surrounding it, but the space that makes composition and framing possible in photography. As an organizer of space, the body also serves as a primary measuring unit, by which we perceive and construct our environment. Such an approach can be linked to the practices of literally using the body as a first unit of measurement, practices which were not only common to the building of vernacular architecture around the world but were also at work in the temples of India, Egypt and Greece, to name a few.



This type of work, for which I use the term *photographic event*, situates itself *at the intersection of several arts*: painting, photography, sculpture; and includes elements of body art, land art, performance, design, gymnastics, dance or acrobatics. Unlike in classical photography of the nude, where the individual body is glorified and presented as the main object of focus, here, my “models” (now over fifty friends have lent themselves to working in very arduous situations) mostly look away from the camera, sometimes with their back turned toward it. By contemplating or blending in with the lines, shapes and tonality of the landscape, they invite the viewer to stay with the environment with which they coexist.

Conversely, the flying and the partially buried body are markers of two simultaneous axes in our existential as

well as architectural development: the vertical plane of our higher aspirations and the horizontal plane of our linear growth, our earthen desires as well as our mortality.

The preparation for each photographic “project” presented involves feeling the landscape; following its lines, volumes and textures; scouting and selecting the specific location; exploring the colors and designs; setting up, sculpting, working with the lay of the land; and finally, selecting colors and designs for the bodies. Here, rather than being a mere recording of an encounter between event and photographer, the photograph is an event of its own: long-prepared, and yet full of unexpected moments; a still manifestation of an encounter between desert light, body light and camera eye.

Finally, photography comes and goes with appearances. And in the desert, nothing is as fixed or as still as it appears to the ordinary eye. Identities shift minute by minute with light and time. The landscape of bare bones and of constant mirages has taught us much about our illusions and delusions. Paradoxically, photography, the dominant function of which is to record the ‘real,’ can be one of the ideal media to enable one *to dream while realistically standing firm on the ground.*

Jean-Paul Bourdier is Professor of Architecture at UC Berkeley. All photos appear courtesy of Jean-Paul Bourdier and are not digitally manipulated.

