

# The Sacred Monsters of Ariane Lopez-Huici

By Edmund White



The photographer Ariane Lopez-Huici is a small dervish of energy and gay laughter and effervescence. She is always advancing from Paris to New York (her two main residences) to Mali (which has become her new spiritual home) to the South America of her ancestors or to the Far East. She is in search of images, not the tourist's snapshots (her eye is not that passive) but rather those pictures that contest her own being or confirm her darkest suspicions or brightest hopes about human nature. She is full of kindness and alertness and she lavishes on everyone around her a hundred small attentions, but this generous social manner has nothing to do with her work, which is cool and objective and a bit awestruck by the excesses she has uncovered. Not that she is ever satirical; on the contrary, she ennobles what the world regards as monstrous.

I suppose the strangest paradox is that this tiny woman should be attracted to women (and occasionally men) of such grand proportions. She photographs them not as a Diane Arbus would, emphasizing their weirdness, their marginality and their unhappiness.

No, she shows them as serene and above all **expressive** beings, large because they are aristocrats, and she poses them against classical drapery in a warm crosslight against an absorbent black void. It is as if the Venus of Willendorff were exhibited with the same respect, the same tenderness, as the Venus de Milo.

Aviva is one of Lopez-Huici's key figures. She is a professional artist's model in New York though previously she never wanted to pose for a photographer. As Lopez-Huici has written: "In the act of creation there are many unknown elements, in any case for me. If I knew the answer in advance I wouldn't take pictures; the choice of models depends on a lot of circumstances: how we meet, desire, the possibilities that attract and intrigue you, the thrill of going beyond established norms, the confidence that one creates in order to convince a particular person to pose. The irreducible mystery of my models is what I photograph."

In the case of Aviva, Lopez-Huici worked with her over a period of several years in an atmosphere of calm acceptance and admiration. "She's a funny, intelligent woman," Lopez-Huici confides. "At the end of our collaboration she took possession of her body. I enabled her to bring out what was hidden inside her. She knows that I found her to be **magnifique**." The prevailing condemnation of Rubenesque proportions in our society and the corresponding epidemic of anorexia is something that Lopez-Huici finds to be "worse than a sickness—it's a sign of moral weakness."

Because the photographer has looked long and hard at Aviva, she has found in her many moods—the languor of a **grande horizontale**, the surprising delicacy of the truly monumental woman, a Medea-like ferocity and certainly great heights of ecstasy. Lopez-Huici has shown Aviva's small, fine joints, the imperial torque of her

twisting body, the protective, childlike fervor with which she embraces her breasts, the lightness with which she flees some unseen satyr—we can't help but compare her with Picasso's two big women bathers running with abandon alongside the sea.

In her important study of the female nude in painting, **Seeing Through Clothes**, Anne Hollander has remarked that the underlying principle of the Baroque is motion—turbulent skies, dive-bombing angels, ascending virgins, bodiless heads of putti rising with a saint in flight. The clothes are composed of many ruffles and ruches, all to demonstrate wind-rippled motion—and even the naked body is full of puckers and pockets and ripples to suggest that it, too, is in constant motion. In that sense the bodies of these majestic women are Baroque. Cellulite has become the medium of motion.

Dalila Khatir presented the photographer with a special problem: she is Algerian even if born in France, and her religion forbids nudity. In her professional life she is a dancer who works under a costume of many veils. Ariane Lopez-Huici had to persuade her slowly to unveil. She had to throw off not only her veils but also strong taboos against breaking the codes of her religion and of her family (she is one of seven children) and she had to confront the Muslim interdiction against revealing a woman's beauty (the privilege of looking at female beauty is reserved for the intimacy of the family).

Because Dalila is a dancer she knows how to move and how to present herself; she is the most active collaborator a photographer could have. Her astonishing agility is immediately obvious from the pictures as is the suppleness of a performer who inhabits every centimeter of her body. Whether she is reaching into the void to grasp something we presume is as round as her own breasts or is squaring off and bracing herself like a fighter facing a

threat or is simply giving us the elegant Ingres-like tranquility of her back and profile incised with the lateral dash of her eye—no matter what she is doing, Dalila is a verb, and the verb is performative. By turns peaceful and ferocious, at all times she glows with the force of her namesake.

Dalila is at once petite and huge—her small hands emerge coquettishly from under her long, smooth, gourdlike breasts. Above her wide, sloping shoulders she laughs and holds her head at a rakish, dashing angle, her mouth “too large for beauty but generous enough for love,” as the composer Bellini once said of the soprano Maria Malibran. Her nose is tiny and pert, worthy of a sketch by Pascin.

In a seismic moment of hilarity Dalila holds her breasts high and hugs herself with total amusement. A moment later she is leaning into despair, her mouth turned down, her face tragic, her hands extended as if she is turning the Wheel of Fate—as if she is performing one of those Buddhist gestures or **mudras** so full of cosmic significance.

Those photographers interested in the grotesque find the one pose for each model that best expresses what is shocking or terrifying or freakish about him or her. Since Lopez-Huici has no such intention and finds beauty and subtlety and humanity at its most rapturous in her models, she gives us a wide variety of poses—and this very plurality humanizes her subjects, renders all the lights and half-lights in her compositions. “I never want to succumb to morbidity,” Lopez-Huici remarks. “Even if my subjects seem light and gay, our rapport usually develops extremely slowly. These are not snapshots but rather studio portraits that demand time and are often difficult to achieve. I do not **steal** moments from unsuspecting subjects; instead I collaborate with them and I consult with them at every stage of the

process. Dalila, for instance, has no motive for posing beyond her own personal journey of self-discovery. I'm something like a midwife—I permit something to come out of my models, but it is something that was already there, if unsuspected."

When she was fifty Ariane Lopez-Huici made a fifteen-minute film of herself dancing in the nude, and this film (which she has shown to Aviva and Dalila) represented such a reckless act of self-revelation that it lent courage to her models as well. "I know that Dalila could be severely punished under Koranic law for posing nude; never for a moment do I forget her tremendous strength of character." That's why these photographs are not voyeuristic glimpses through an open door but rather loving acts of complicity.

In the world of sumo-like proportions men and women become the same gender, or nearly so. Just look at Holly, the man with the woman's name buried in a mountain of flesh. To be sure, his feet are bigger, his legs and belly hairy and strong, but his torso and back and arms have the same moon-crater beauty as Dalila's. In pictures of him as well as of the women, Lopez-Huici usually uses only a single spot, which further emphasizes the highlands and basins of these lunar surfaces.

Curiously enough, when Holly is teamed up with Valeria, a woman of more normal proportions, his masculinity becomes instantly more apparent. No longer is his face turned away; now we can see his beard and his heavily muscled upper arms flex as he tries to capture the fleeing nymph. She floats high like a ballerina in the arms of her partner. In this entire series of pictures the man and woman are vague with movement, overexposed and balletic, stylized and primal, integers of pure movement, though motion is the last thing we normally associate with obesity.

The blurriness of their limbs, the soft focus of their gestures, seems to be a kind of visual confusion on our part, as if we are so overwhelmed by these scenes of Sabine violence that our vision can no longer take it all in. Some frames are in such a blur that we can interpret them only because we have seen the pictures that precede and follow. If some of the poses are worthy of a Bernini, and we expect to see the woman's fingers sprouting leaves, in others Holly and Valeria have become four-legged beasts engaged in deadly, snarling combat. Even in this fierce grappling the soapstone softness and dissolving-sugar luminosity of their bodies reminds us of rough pagan subjects rendered by sophisticated neoclassical sculptors.

In certain societies a particular kind of behavior is either entirely forbidden, even considered criminal and unthinkable—or it is sacralized. Brother-sister incest, for instance, was labeled monstrous in ancient Egypt—except for the pharaoh, who had to marry his sister. Freud, in uncovering the way the unconscious can distinguish a quality (black, say) by invoking its opposite (white), pointed out that in many languages a word stands for both itself and its opposite.

In this spirit we must approach the nude pictures of Deedee and her son Danny. They are either shocking or the most natural thing in the world; they are either infamous or holy, vile or wonder-working. Their intimacy is obvious in the way they hold hands, just as the resemblance of his right foot to hers proves their consanguinity. Even the dark circles under their eyes point to their shared genetic heritage. When Danny hugs his knees and rests his head on his mother's lap, we see that when a grown man actually does what so many lesser mortals only dream of doing (when he actually assumes the foetal position beside his mother's womb), his mood is anguished and hers almost soporific with serenity.

In her photos of Toshiko and Toni, Lopez-Huici has demonstrated with mathematical rigor the compatibility of human bodies, for a black woman with dreadlocks and strong features and muscular arms interlocks and interacts with a graceful, delicate Japanese woman with small features, straight hair and tiny waist. They are as intertwined as the elements of a Rubik's Cube. Of course by posing the pair in such a daring, ingenious way the photographer has pushed them into an extreme hieroglyph of intimacy. Even in repose the way the Japanese body reflects the lateral light and the African body absorbs it places racial difference beyond all social barriers into an ideal world of pictorial values.

In Mali Ariane Lopez-Huici won her way into a bordello on the River Niger where she photographed Awa, Baya and Aisha, all of them foreigners. She shows them as Matisse might have done in improbable but seductive poses, a certain awkwardness in the feet-first compositions challenging our slick, pornographic preconceptions of airbrushed female eroticism. In the photos of David, a black American, and Cecilia, a white French woman, the subject of race is taken up again but once again the esthetic triumphs over the merely anecdotal, perhaps because the unusual cropping emphasizes the contrast between man and woman, satiny black and powdery white. In real life this beautiful couple wanted Ariane to record their love at its peak; here photography is being used to stop time and to preserve memory (even the soft focus has the quality of remembered moments).

A solitary white man masturbating; paired black wrestlers, oiled and grappling, in Mali; Bill Shannon, a young man with a degenerative disease of the hips, who has improbably become a street performer and

dancer on his crutches (he's known as "The Crutchmaster")—these are all sequences in Lopez-Huici's work. A solitary search for release, a traditional African contest, a struggle for survival that has been turned into an art form—these are all human rites and inventions honored in all their difference and specificity. Roland Barthes once objected to a huge photographic show, "The Family of Man," by saying that any exhibition that equated starving Third World children with swollen bellies with well-fed and well-clothed children in France or England by placing them all under the general rubric of "Childhood" was actually a rear-guard conservative strategy designed to tranquillize political awareness and de-fang political activism. This leveling process is the opposite of the one Lopez-Huici pursues. She maintains each of her subjects in all of his or her glowing individuality; she respects difference; she equates nothing with anything else.

For instance Lopez-Huici's level gaze, her alert, participatory awareness lend an inevitability to her sequence of 17 photos of Kenekoubo Ogorie, the Master of Ceremonies of the Dogon dancers in Mali. An old man in a trance, holding a stick, dances faster and faster until his movements become a blur. He laughs, he throws his head back, he jumps in the air, he runs in place, he slows down and returns to earth—and he laughs heartily. Lopez-Huici errs neither in the direction of detached ethnographic sterility nor in the other direction of bemused, superior voyeurism. She is neither objective here nor ironic. To the degree one can enter into the mind-set of such a different world she has done so. Or at least her photographs seem to substantiate such an evaluation, for they never "look away," as it were. She is able to drink it all in. Is this participation erotic? The critic Jeanne Siegel, writing in **Art Press**, suggests as much: "The experience approaches the cinematic, particularly when a number of single frames are seen

together. Her participation, her watching while recording, is undoubtedly an erotic experience. She is an accomplice in an activity that is a fulfillment of desire.” Certainly Lopez-Huici herself has said she agrees with Andre Masson that it is always a mistake to separate Art and Eros. Without ever falling into post-colonial “Orientalism,” Lopez-Huici often locates desire and the esthetic in non-European or pre-modern cultures.

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