

Ariane Lopez-Huici

Two or Three Things We Know About Her

by Carter Ratcliff

The subjects of Ariane Lopez-Huici's photographs often prompt a question: why is this person here, in front of the camera? Why would an enormous woman present herself, naked, to the lens? Why would a man masturbate for the photographic record? Sometimes one asks: what is the photographer herself doing here? Or, more simply, where is she? We don't know. Perhaps we can't know. Nonetheless, there are two or three things we know about her.

She is a photographer

She is not afraid of flesh

She is not in love with pure form.

Nor with impure form, for she does not believe in simple dichotomies. We know this about her because her photographs are alive with complex dichotomies—nude versus naked, for example. In our culture, the naked are those who appear before us undressed. Those who are nude are also undressed. Yet they are clothed in an ideal. As easy as it is to see what the nude and the naked share, it is difficult to see what differentiates them—what sets them so thoroughly at odds with one another that they form a dichotomy. Moreover, it is not certain that the dichotomy turns on anything visible. Nonetheless, Lopez-Huici's photographs picture it—not the opposition of the real and the ideal, but the way this opposition illuminates people it cannot define.

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Against the backdrop of a mud wall, a man with a stick is standing. His body is taut, until—as one of Lopez-Huici's images shows—the tension uncoils and graceful curves reshape his limbs and spine. A kind of ecstasy closes his eyes. The camera watches him but he doesn't look back. He knows himself as a physical, not a visual, presence. I don't want to deny what is obvious: bodies are both visible and palpable. Yet Lopez-Huici's photographs of the man with a stick remind us that these qualities are not stable. In our image-saturated culture, the visibility of the body obscures or even erases its physicality. The lens reduces us to images. In other cultures, it lacks this despotic power. Entranced by his own energy, the man with a stick does not present the

photographer with a camera-ready self-image of the kind we call a “look.” Where did Lopez-Huici find this man?

It is interesting to know that she was born in Biarritz, that she has studios in Paris and New York. However, these facts are not crucial to her pictures of Aviva, Dalila, and Holly, for she photographed them in the unmoored space of the studio: the zone of the esthetic, a place that could be, in principle, anywhere. As for the man with a stick—she could have photographed him only in the place where he lives. This, it turns out, is a village in Mali, the nation just to the south of Algeria. Every photograph presents the problem of the caption. Lopez-Huici’s titles give us only the man’s name, Kenekoubo Ogoïre, yet she is willing to talk about him, to explain that he is an animist, that his stick beats a tempo for dancers whose masks invoke the spirits inhabiting the Malian landscape.

Asked about Sekou Dolo, the subject of another series of Malian portraits, Lopez-Huici says that he is a bird hunter. He wears his cloth cap, with its “beak” and two “wings,” to bring him closer, in spirit, to his prey. Arranged to cover one eye, the cap effects a kind of disguise: as a bird presents only one eye to him, so Sekou Dolo becomes more bird-like by hiding one of his eyes. If we knew none of this, Lopez-Huici’s pictures of Sekou Dolo and Kenekoubo Ogoïre—these studies of posture, gesture, expression, and form—would, I think, engage us powerfully. So we could do without the artist’s descriptions of her Malian subjects. Why, then, does she provide them? Partly to relieve us from the distractions of curiosity. We can’t help wondering who these men are, where they are from, and until we know we may not be able to give our full attention to their images. By supplying, in effect, a set of extended captions, Lopez-Huici frees us to look. And there is a larger purpose to her Malian commentary.

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Lopez-Huici and her husband, the sculptor Alain Kirili, are veteran travelers. During the past few years, they have made several trips to the central regions of Mali, to spend time among the Dogon people. In recalling these visits, Lopez-Huici always mentions their animism, which ascribes an individual spirit to certain places and things. She remarks, as well, on the Dogons’ struggle to preserve their animism against the encroachments of Islam, from the north. Her sympathies are with the Dogon, for animism insists on the primacy of the particular, at the expense of the universal, and so does the art of Lopez-Huici.

Though it is tempting to see Lopez-Huici among the Dogon as yet another European succumbing to the allure of the exotic, it looks to me as if she is drawn to Mali by something familiar and, in a way, reassuring. Western monotheism has not, after all,

completely defeated our own animism. There are traces of it in our habit of attributing moods to weather and virtues to certain substances. Even physicists talk of the noble metals, and the old Latin phrase, *genius loci* or spirit of the place, is perfectly intelligible to us, even if we no longer expect that spirit to be embodied in a nymph or dryad. Early-modern proponents of the picturesque saw “character” and “expression” in certain landscapes. The picturesque may be old hat but its animistic vision still makes sense to us. A stone, a bird, a tree, a building, a piece of detritus on an urban pavement—we have no difficulty seeing or feeling an individual spirit in any of these things. Granted, we rarely dwell on our animistic impulses. Yet we have them, despite the teachings of monotheism, and I think Lopez-Huici should be understood as traveling to Mali to be among people who acknowledge explicitly what is implicit everywhere, even in Paris and New York.

The conflict between animism and monotheism has a counterpart in the standoff between nominalism and what was called, in medieval times, realism. The nominalists believed that there are only particulars: as conceptually convenient as universals may be, they are nonentities and therefore empty. Realists argued, to the contrary, that universals are real things, more real than any particular. In their view, specific objects and individual people are derivative and thus valuable only as instances of universal categories. This dispute recalls the Platonic distinction between appearances and reality: what we perceive is ephemeral, a veil of contingencies hiding the abidingly real. Plato is of course not the only ancient Greek philosopher to have reasoned along these lines. The dubiousness of the perceived world is a commonplace of early metaphysics, and it persists even now, in academic philosophy and in our everyday views of the world.

Not that we show much consistency in these matters. As I said, we are intuitive animists. Yet we are also universalizers, unreflective Platonists habitually appealing to essences, eternal truths, transcendent categories. Talk of national and cultural essences pervades our politics. Our sexuality is shaped by ideals of an absolutist nature, and we deform our experience of art by falling back on quasi-Platonic certainties about historical periods, stylistic boundaries, and much else. Thus art remains what it became for certain Romantics: a substitute religion.

We cannot call Lopez-Huici a secular artist. She is too responsive to the Dogon and their spirits. Yet she doesn't seek universals. An artist of particulars, she is a nominalist of sorts—and her nominalism makes her sympathetic to the animist's intuition that the divine is not one but many. Alive to Dogon culture, happy to recall its subtleties, Lopez-

Huici always mentions its vulnerability to Islam. Here we see the larger purpose of her reminiscences of Mali. Her comments on monotheism's threat to animism are oblique declarations of a love for individuality, which is a distrust of the universal. Thus she gives us a way to see the unity of an oeuvre that, at first glance, looks thoroughly fragmented. In mappable places, she makes pictures of clothed Africans. In the virtual space of the studio, she photographs naked citizens of Europe and America. What's the connection? The Africans illuminate the others, by showing what Lopez-Huici's puts at stake.

Without her commentary, her images of Sekou Dolo and Kenekoubo Ogoïre would be powerful but obscure. Though the artist's remarks about these men and her visits to Mali do not make everything clear, they provide crucial help. Having heard—or sensed—what animism means to Lopez-Huici, one turns from the individuality of her African pictures to its equivalent in her nudes. Yet one doesn't find it in the same luminous state. Among the Dogon, the individuality of the individual person, creature, object, or event preserves its archaic primacy. In European and American culture, individuality is subject to contrary forces. Propped up by rhetoric left over from early-modern times—the ideology of individual rights, self-expression, and so on—it is undermined by monotheism and its universalizing allies: scientism, bureaucracy, the marketplace. So the pictures Lopez-Huici makes in Paris and New York cannot be as straightforward as the ones she makes in Africa. To show the particular, these Western images must simultaneously dismantle the scaffolding of the universal. In carrying out this intricate maneuver, Lopez-Huici deploys certain ironies.

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Summing up a long history in a phrase, let us say that Titian established the reclining female nude as a major theme in Western art. In the 19th century, a number of painters—most notably Ingres—rendered the theme exotic by presenting the reclining nude as an odalisque: woman as trophy, held captive in the seraglio. Lopez-Huici's Aviva, too, is an odalisque—or, anyway, her poses conform to the artifice of that motif: on elegantly arranged bedclothes, a naked woman assumes languorously horizontal postures. Yet she is not an odalisque because, to speak bluntly, she is too heavy. Her bulk makes it impossible for her to squeeze into the image of ideal female beauty that Ingres and Titian and many others rendered so perspicuous with their reclining nudes.

Though it is always presented as eternal and unchanging, that ideal never looks the same from one era to the next. Titian's nudes are far too chunky by today's standard, which is promulgated by movies and fashion magazines. Nonetheless, from ancient Athenian times until now, the ideally beautiful woman is always seen—or it might be better to say, is always understood—as slim, not heavy. I stress understanding over seeing because Western ideals are so thoroughly conceptual, even ideals of

appearance. After all, Western sensibilities still yearn to transcend appearances or, if that is impossible, to imbue them with the authority of universalizing thought. Thus etherealized by art, the flesh is no longer that of a particular person. It is the clothing of a motif, a universal category, an Idea. Thus the naked becomes the nude, to recall the dichotomy I mentioned at the outset. Aviva's flesh, however, will not submit to this transformation. Lopez-Huici presents her as an odalisque in the ironic mode—though putting it this way gives a wrong impression. Aviva is not merely a portrait subject. Like all those who appear in Lopez-Huici's photographs, she is an active participant, a full collaborator in the process that generates the image.

When we focus on the abundance of Aviva's flesh, the artist's irony becomes that of her subject, and Aviva's presence acquires a tone of defiance: yes, she assumes the poses of an odalisque, but only to dismiss the ideals those poses serve. However, if we see her flesh not as a spectacle but simply as flesh, as the corporeality of a particular person, irony melts away and the ideal lingers only in a dismantled state. Of course, everyone from Titian to the moment's hottest fashion photographer, not to mention the sculptors of ancient Greece, form a chorus urging us not to see in Aviva anything but the blatant failure to measure up to the ideal. We cannot help but hear these cultivated voices. Do we obey them? If we do, Aviva is excluded from the category of the acceptably human.

Rephrased, this question of one's obedience to the dictates of a standard of beauty turns into the question posed at the inauguration of modern society: who is to be included? Earlier, the matter of inclusion was settled by appeal to ironclad criteria—chiefly those of social status and race. But modernity is inconvenient. Founded on an ideal of equality, it burdens us with the task of deciding, every time we meet another person, if we want to put our egalitarian ideals into practice. Do we want to accord this individual the degree of humanity we accord ourselves? Usually, this question is answered in an unthinking way. Our judgments of others are routine, banal—and then we come face to face with Lopez-Huici's images of Aviva, Dalila, and Holly, and the premises of our habitual responses become visible.

These premises are, once again, ideals, transcendent standards, universal categories. Lopez-Huici invokes them with traditional poses: for women, the odalisque; for men, the warrior. Giving these poses to people too big for them, she confounds the ideals. Though Holly is huge and may well have a warrior's strength, he doesn't have the look of a warrior, as defined by ancient statues of Hercules and Antaeus or 17th-century paintings of the Rape of the Sabines. When Lopez-Huici shows him in poses borrowed

from those sources, we feel a dissonance. We have felt this before, while looking at the pictures of Aviva as a reclining nude. The ideal descends, to consider her inclusion, and before it can reject her, she rejects it—and the very notion of the ideal.