

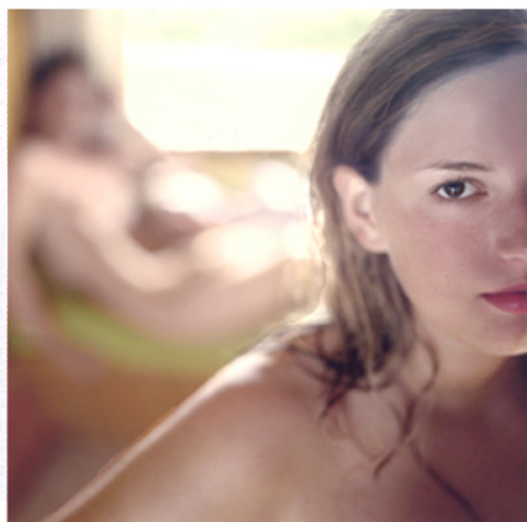
art on paper

□ exhibition reviews

SANTA FE

Mona Kuhn at Photo-Eye Gallery

The debut exhibition in the U.S. of Mona Kuhn's flawless chromogenic prints coincided with the publication of her first major monograph (Steidl, distributed by D.A.P.). A San Francisco-based artist of German-Brazilian ancestry, Kuhn photographs in naturist communities. The "models" are her friends, and the resulting photographs reveal a comfortable and graceful intimacy between the photographer and her subjects. The large works contain luscious young bodies that suggest the meditative repose of classical statuary; the mood is one of sensuous languor—an almost Edenic eroticism that is neither "sexy" nor exploitative. Her images, which compel us to slow down internally, are quiet and lack any specific narrative context, oscillating between unrehearsed and gently choreographed. Kuhn treats bodies more like still-life objects, without degrading them or stripping them of authenticity. Using a restrained depth of field, Kuhn makes "painterly" background spaces that are dreamlike and populated by softly slurred bodies, supple and supine. Informed by art history, they remind us of Venetian or Impressionist painting, the stately movement of figures in frieze sculpture, Ingresque voluptuaries, or the slow rhetorical gestures and postures in Rodin's work.



Mona Kuhn, *Merle*, C-print (30 x 30 in.), 2003.

Her colors are fresh and sensuous, but Kuhn is also a gifted tonalist, "painting" with a wide range of mid tones. And yet, she is capable of a provocative chiaroscuro, as in *David* (2003) and *Hannah* (2003), both of which could hint at orientalist paintings of opium dens and not the sauna, if only they appeared more sinister and decadent. In *Couch Stories* (2002), we see two young women in a dramatically foreshortened space lit with a shimmering natural light. The young man in *George by the Door* (2002) exemplifies the lyrical freedom of her subjects inside their own skin, while *Merle* (2003), who is perched on the front of the picture plane, indicates the creative complicity of Kuhn's friends in her art.

—W. Jackson Rushing III