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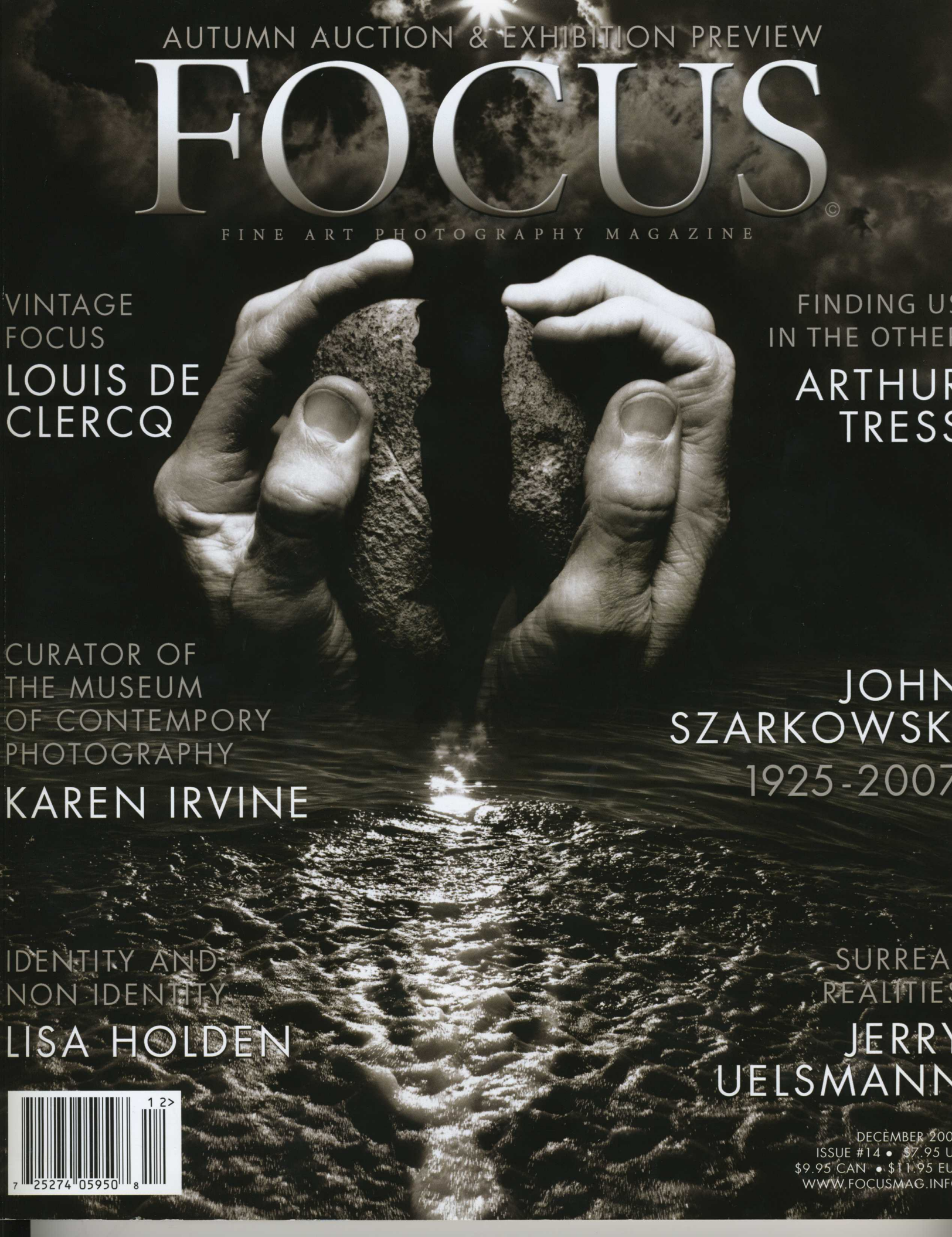

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IDENTITY AND NON IDENTITY
LISA HOLDEN

SURREA REALITIES
JERRY UELSMANN

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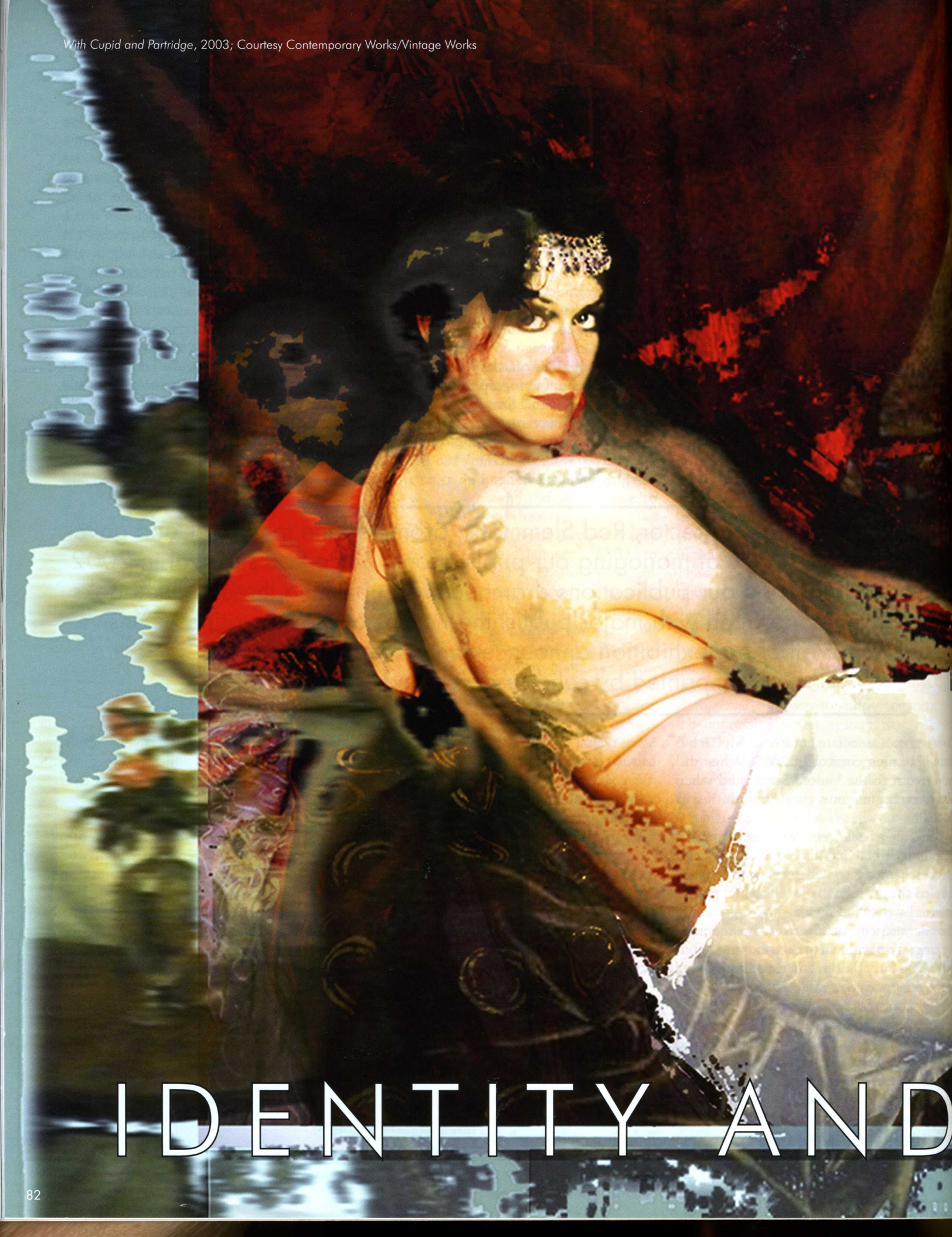
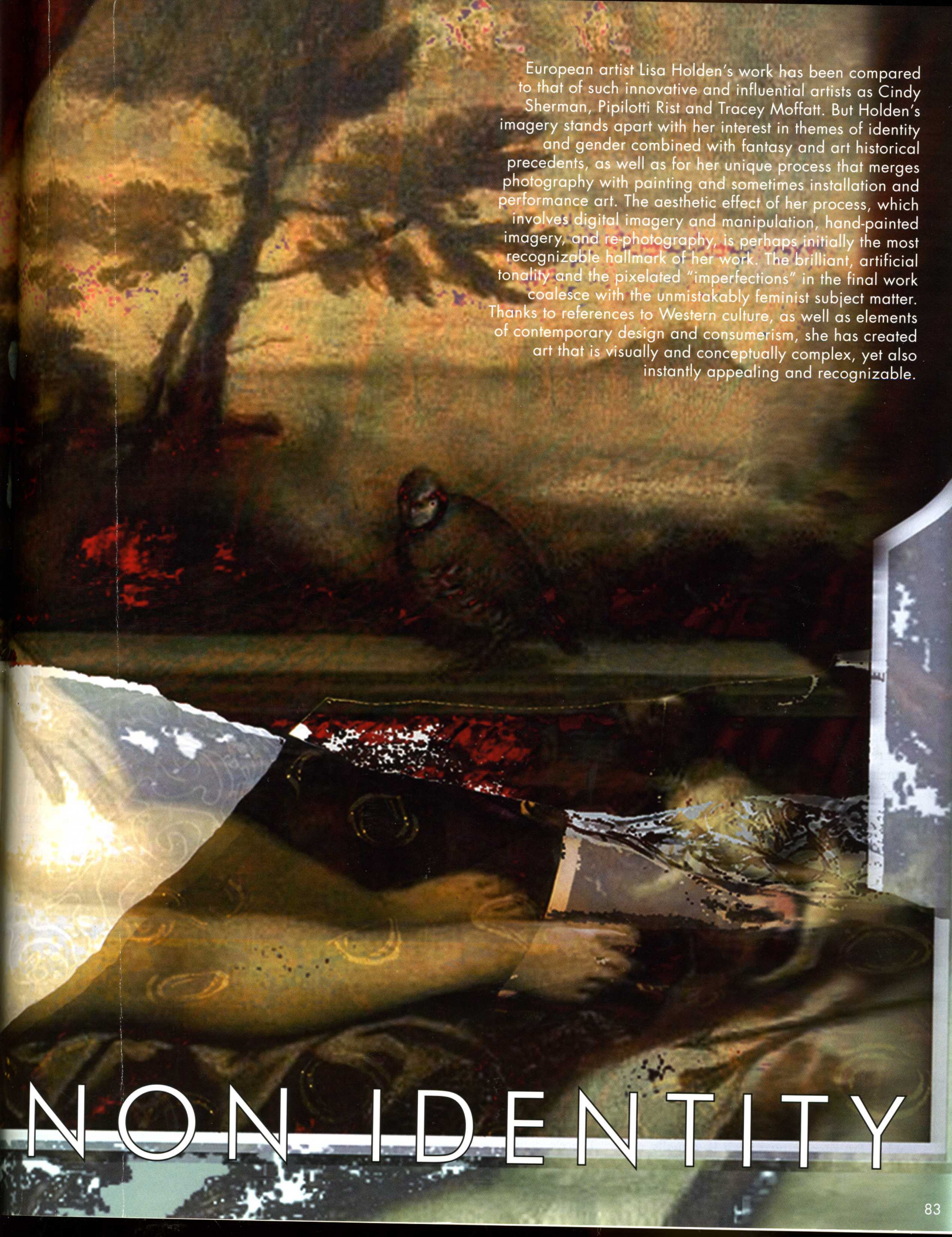


With Cupid and Partridge, 2003; Courtesy Contemporary Works/Vintage Works

IDENTITY AND



European artist Lisa Holden's work has been compared to that of such innovative and influential artists as Cindy Sherman, Pipilotti Rist and Tracey Moffatt. But Holden's imagery stands apart with her interest in themes of identity and gender combined with fantasy and art historical precedents, as well as for her unique process that merges photography with painting and sometimes installation and performance art. The aesthetic effect of her process, which involves digital imagery and manipulation, hand-painted imagery, and re-photography, is perhaps initially the most recognizable hallmark of her work. The brilliant, artificial tonality and the pixelated "imperfections" in the final work coalesce with the unmistakably feminist subject matter. Thanks to references to Western culture, as well as elements of contemporary design and consumerism, she has created art that is visually and conceptually complex, yet also instantly appealing and recognizable.

NON IDENTITY

LISA

"I think the notion of identity fascinates me for several reasons. Partly because of personal experience (a sense of disconnectedness, also on a larger scale in the sense of being unable easily to feel part of a heritage, either personally or in a broader context) and partly because I think it reflects many aspects in contemporary culture, at least in the West."

Since much of your art poses questions about identity, can you talk a bit about your background and how you ended up living in Amsterdam?

I was born in London. My mother is South African and my father Austrian. I was adopted as a baby by British parents and brought up in the North of England, in the Merseyside area (near Liverpool). I always felt a little disconnected from my immediate environment when I was growing up. I always wondered about my birth parents, who they were and that sort of thing. I always felt restless and had a sense of not belonging. I moved to the Netherlands in my twenties. Amsterdam, where I live, is very small but has always been a melting pot of cultures. So I find it quite an appropriate place to live, in that sense.

The theme of identity has been prominent in contemporary art for the past few decades and is still fueling the work of many artists today. Do you feel like identity is a concept you'll be considering throughout your life?

I think the notion of identity fascinates me for several reasons. Partly because of personal experience (a sense of disconnectedness, also on a larger scale in the sense of being unable easily to feel part of a heritage, either personally or in a broader context) and partly because I think it reflects many aspects in contemporary culture, at least in the West. At one level I see identity as a series of acquired behaviours and mimicry, which is fluid by definition and context-dependent. But I think that perhaps what I'm preoccupied with is actually non-identity or the loss of the self. We learn ways of being, ways of communicating, assume masks to function in the wider world, but how does this connect to the core of who we are? These ideas aren't new but still hold currency; I'm fascinated in the individual becoming separated from him/herself, losing touch with what his/her drives really are, becoming a stranger to him/herself.

On a nuts and bolts level, I also see identity as a thing related to genetic material and manipulation. I'm intrigued by the world of sperm/egg donation and surrogate parenting. And other types of future-scenario human fertility. It's a new way of creating family. What kind of issues does it raise about identity, roots, belonging, etc? Fertility treatment also introduces a commodity value to parenting — you can perhaps choose the sex of your child, or choose a particular ethnicity. And intelligence if possible, plus, of course, the ability to eliminate, in time, certain genetic defects. And, of course, it's available to people who can pay for it. I think these are fascinating aspects too. I'll be interested to see how these impact ways in which people see themselves and society.

You've said that Claude Cahun with her blend of surrealism and self portraiture and Urs Luthi's work from the 1970s has been a major influence on your work. Your art has a shared theatrical quality with that of Cahun and Luthi. Is that something you are aware of, even if it may not seem particularly theatrical to create portions of your compositions on a computer?

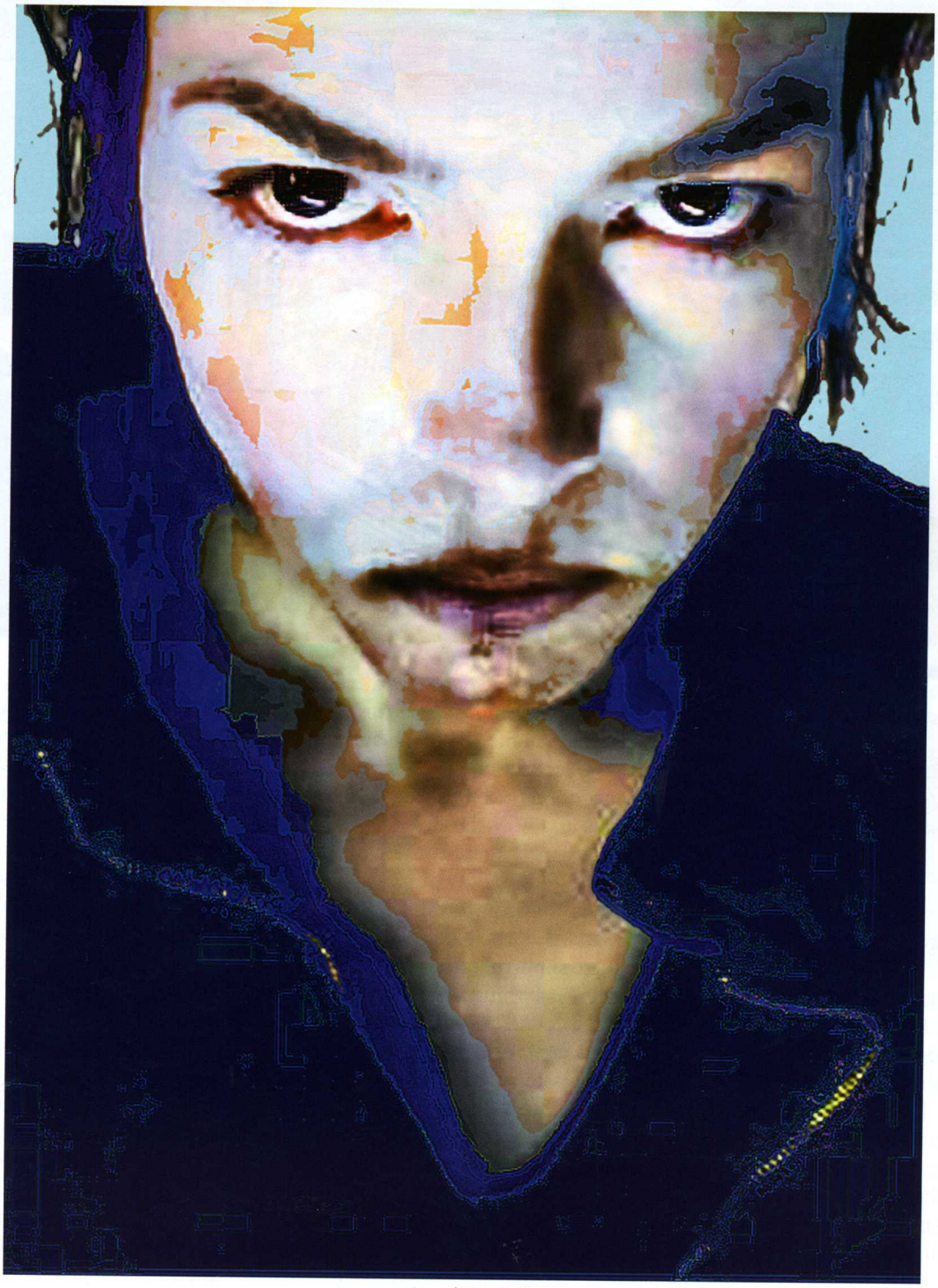
There's definitely a sense of theatre in my work. My work has always been performative. I also consider the work done in the computer as performative in the sense that I can only spend a certain amount of time or energy before the buzz, for want of a better word, is lost. I work quickly and intuitively in the computer — there's always a sense of urgency, of trying to lock onto a feeling, something that is always elusive but which I sometimes feel close to capturing. I'm trying to get something of this into the work — a kind of pace, a glimpse of something just out of reach.

Does that performative element parlay into your use of the image of the geisha in some of your work?

I find the image of the geisha appealing for several reasons. It's clearly a highly theatrical phenomenon. It's an image of the exotic for the West, it's an image that represents a certain aspect of identity — we're looking at an artificial cultural expression of beauty, femininity, art, entertainment cultivated over centuries and highly respected. I think there are actually six types of geisha. And I read that some think that geisha were originally men who entertained in a society called "the water world."

There are so many misconceptions about the geisha — sexual connotations particularly — that the image of the geisha has become loaded with other meanings in the West. It's become a kind of stock character, I think, a stereotype. Just put on white face makeup, redden your lips and wear a black wig, and you're a geisha. It's a kind of "identikit" identity, a uniform, a non-identity. I think that's fascinating — you train from childhood for this profession, putting yourself outside of

HOLDEN



Lizard Boy, 2003; Courtesy Contemporary Works/Vintage Works

Sphinx, 2006; Courtesy Contemporary Works/Vintage Works

'normal' life to acquire these skills. It's very ritualistic, and has an element of the magical.

When did you start using yourself as an element of your artwork? Do you think of your art that features yourself as self-portraiture?

I started using myself in my work about 10 years ago. First, I started by doing performances based on brief stream-of-consciousness type 'monologues' I delivered while sort of ritualistically splashing myself with pungent oils (vanilla and other stuff that is very sickly and sweet) and crudely applying makeup. There'd be music in the background — soul music often, because I liked the sugary girl meets boy lyrics. The texts were culled from notes of dreams, things jotted down from TV soaps and random thoughts. The performances were a little absurd, a little surreal, and had a rawness.

Why does Victorian painting and literature interest you as of late?

I started looking at the origins of photography. It was intriguing to see that, even though it was a new medium, people turned to classical painting as models for image making. I have a small collection of studio portraits dating from around the 1900s. I loved the painted backdrops and how the sitter sat or stood so stiffly among props meant to invoke classical antiquity. I found those images sometimes pretentious, sometimes vaguely comical and a little sad. Also, the old studio photos were attempts to show the sitters' status and didn't really tell us anything about them apart from that. And I found myself making up stories about the characters, looking for cracks in the posed expressions that might show a bit of the person behind.

I was brought up near Liverpool where the entire city really boomed in the Victorian era. There's amazing architecture there still. It's also a city that derived part of its wealth from the slave trade. It's a fascinating place for looking at identity and a society in flux. It also had one of the first women who campaigned for the rights of women, including prostitutes and their illegitimate children (this became a big issue in Victorian times). So I grew up surrounded by the extremes of Victorian heritage — big burly architecture, larger than life-size statues of Queen Victoria, and a love of art. The new money wanted a different kind of art and the Pre-Raphaelites seemed to fit the bill. Highly saturated colours, sugary portrayals of women and romanticised medieval themes.

I began looking at the painter Rossetti, and noticed that, like geishas, all his women look the same: whitish pallor, large poppy-coloured lips, a dreamy if not vacant gaze. And surprisingly enough, they look quite like portraits he drew of himself. So here again was an "identikit" way of looking at femininity and a sort of projection of the artist onto his subjects. I found that identity-exchange/interchange quite interesting.

Another aspect to Victorian literature is the sense of the gothic. I have recently been reading Wilkie Collins, said to be the creator of the suspense novel/thriller. He often uses two characters in a plot who on some level are two sides of the same person, and interchangeable. His books often feature dual identities, con-

Thru the Wire, 2004; Courtesy Contemporary Works/Vintage Works

fused identities. Also, Collins (like many middle class people of the time) used laudanum, the opiate derivative. In fact, he was addicted to it and claimed that he didn't remember writing passages of some of his books because he'd written then under the influence of laudanum. Collins himself led a bit of double life. At one point, he lived with his secretary (mistress) by whom he had a child, and kept a household with another woman, who had three children by him.

It's an era that really engages me. It's also the time at which the novel really started to evolve — *Wuthering Heights*, for instance, which is non-linear, and uses flashbacks and two narrators. I like the complexity of the narrative and the 'sensational' atmosphere.

When you start with a — for lack of a better description — freestanding artwork (as opposed to a site-specific installation), do you have an idea in mind from the beginning as to where you want to end up? Do you have something like a core set of images in mind to start with?

I have a set of images in mind, but things don't always work to plan. I try to work freely from the original idea so that it can develop naturally. I'm not someone who nails down everything before starting. It's not the way I work. I like to create a bit of chaos and confusion, as that gives me the most freedom to come up with a strong image.

I often work on several series at the same time. Some images take months. Some even take several years. And I like to stay with a series for quite a long time. In some ways I think my process is a little like composing poetry. It needs time to ripen and is often a case of putting down the bare bones in a concentrated flurry of work, then spending months on editing. I've just realized that I didn't embark

Sitting; Courtesy Contemporary Works/Vintage Works

on the body of work I currently produce until after I had actually met my birth parents. Not to make this all too autobiographical, but I have always regarded the camera as a transformative tool.

I think that part of what informs the images is the creation of a narrative and parallel narratives. I don't necessarily need to be the subject, because I am the creator of the narrative. But somewhere, this is about scripting a reality, taking control (I think). In many ways, I consider my work more a form of writing than anything else. My birth parents — I'd obviously built up a fantasy image of them — didn't live up to that fantasy by any means. My father is purely German speaking so we couldn't actually communicate. And my mother seems to have a whole host of issues and a very personal way of looking at reality. I think the images were a way of creating a world or spaces I could inhabit on my own terms. The personal side of it seems to be involved, perhaps as a trigger to all of this.

It's not unusual or even questioned when an artist combines pencil and paint on a canvas or even paint and sculpture. But if an artist combines photography with painting, and better yet with digital manipulation, the process sometimes supersedes discussion of the artwork itself. Why do you think there's so much focus on process when photography and other media are mixed? Is there something specific to photography that creates this response? To be honest, in the visual arts — I trained in the visual arts in the broadest sense, in a program that encouraged you to do use any materials you felt necessary, in any combination — you just get on and make the work. In photography, often the paper the image is actually printed on, the glues used, the backing — the whole thing is considered super-sensitive and must comply with conservation standards. Which is absolutely essential. But I think you're right — in an art context, throwing paint on a photograph, cutting it up and sticking it onto canvas, card or a wall, doesn't raise any eyebrows. But in the context of photography, it's quite adventurous, it seems. I began applying paints and varnishes to the finished image because I thought some of the pieces needed it. It was very spontaneous and something I just did because it seemed necessary. Personally, I don't really mind how an image is made. It's the final work that counts. But I am always asked how the piece is made, how the colors were achieved, how the piece is printed. Some people seem to need details about the process. Maybe it sets their minds at rest that, yes, there's skill involved; it's not just a question of pressing a button on the computer and — ping — out pops an image.

Lisa Holden's artwork can be viewed on her website www.lisa-holden.com. In the U.S. she is represented by Contemporary Works, Chalfont, PA; phone: 1-215-822-5662; email: info@contemporaryworks.net; www.contemporaryworks.net.

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