World of Wax
by Susan Wides
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WAXING PROFOUND

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Wax figures and photography share a similar epistemology. They originated in the nineteenth century as the cult of the visible overwhelmed Western culture; the power of their reception depends on their approximation of reality. When Susan Sontag argues in *On Photography* that "The picture may distort; but there is always a presumption that something exists, or did, which is like what's in the picture,"[1] she could be describing wax figures. The eerie excitement of a wax museum stems in part from a fear that the wax figures might indeed come alive.

Umberto Eco has explored the authenticity of wax figures. David Freedberg has questioned whether wax figures have ever been perceived as "real," using Walter Benjamin's argument about the loss of "aura" in cultural objects in the age of filmic and photographic reproduction. But what happens when you photograph the wax figure? The recent exhibition of Susan Wides's photographic work, "World of Wax," posed the question of how to authenticate the inauthentic.

Wides has produced a group of subtly manipulated images of wax figures that takes the viewer beyond obvious considerations of their surface authenticity. Through her macabre images of the wax John Waynes, Elvis Presleys, and Marilyn Monroes of the United States' vacationlands she provides a critical edge to our understanding of the strangely pleasurable pull of wax museums. Because her work, which combines art, social commentary, and anthropology, does not fit traditional aesthetic categories, Wides's photographs continue the debate on what constitutes "authenticity" and the aesthetic object in North American culture. Her images are currently being taken up by a diverse group of exhibitors—*Premiere* magazine, the French avant-garde gallery scene, and a number of American museums and galleries—each appropriating her work for vastly different audiences.

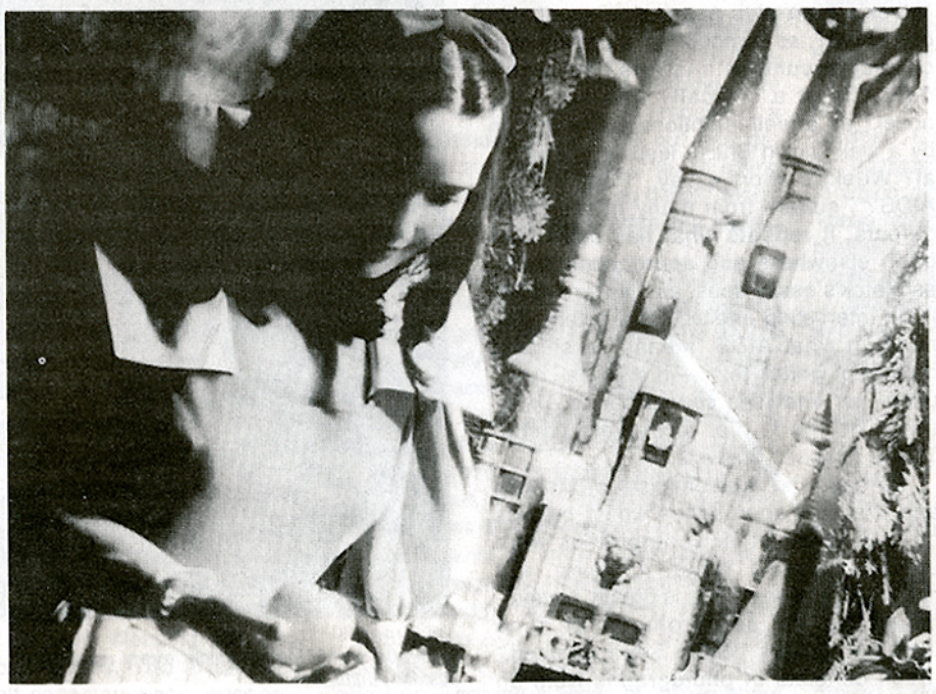
Using subtle photographic manipulations to distance the viewer, Wides focuses on the alienating nature of wax museums and wax working—a world traditionally relegated to the trash heap of commercial culture. Her work is motivated by a desire to challenge postmodernist interpretations of culture, such as Eco's assertion that wax figures exemplify Americans' inability to tell fiction from reality. In *Travels in Hyperreality* Eco singles out the wax museum as one of the central stops on his hermeneutic trip across the U.S. in search of "another universe, the preserve of the average family, the tourist, the politician."[2] Eco sees the wax museum, along with holography, Marvel comics, the Lyndon Johnson Museum, the dioramas of anthropology museums, and most particularly Coca-Cola's slogan "It's the real thing," as signs of this country's cultural poverty—our constant need to approximate something "authentic." "The American imagination demands the real thing and to attain it, must fabricate the absolute false; where boundaries between game and illusion are blurred, the art museum is contaminated by the freak show, and falsehood is enjoyed in a situation of 'fullness' of horror vacui."[3]

In "World of Wax" Wides presents images of perennially reproduced wax figures: Walt Disney's Snow White, Judy Garland as Dorothy, and notorious criminals. Wides is not interested in the thwarted hunger for authenticity that Eco sees as so central to the American experience. Rather, she describes her work as "fragments of social discourse."

In the Hudson River Museum show Wides presented two series of photographs, "Emerald City" and "Strange Love." The "Emerald City" series focused on wax images of American childhood with the wry titles *Pan* (1986), *Yellow Apple* (1987), *Looking Glass* (1987), *Emerald City* (1987), and *Three Graces* (1985). Facing this series in the museum gallery were more startling images of a "mature" wax theme, "Strange Love," with self-consciously lurid titles such as *Screwdriver* (1984), *Complicity* (1986), and *Games* (1986). Within each series of images Wides juxtaposes the figures not only to heighten their stunning visual differences but also to force the reception of the wax figure beyond the simple pleasure of verisimilitude into the realm of social allegory.

Instead of using tight close-up shots of the wax figures that would reveal their artificial character, Wides uses a soft focus, dislocating the viewer's awareness of their materiality and provoking an unusual sense that the photographs are not quite "right." They evolve into comic-book caricatures as the wax reproductions contort and fade, blurring the stereotypes that the celebrities represent. As a result Wides brings out the cultural generalizations that lie just below the surface of the wax figures' obsessive details.

In this exhibit the obsession with the "real" celebrity is no longer the primary focus of interest. For example, in the aptly named photograph *Choices* (1986) three wax female stars are aligned across the frame in such a way that they look like prostitutes in a bordello. Diminution of focus combines with the recession of the figures from the picture plane: the plasticity of Marilyn Monroe's figure slowly gives way to a soft-focus Marlene Dietrich and finally to the rear woman, whose image becomes almost indistinguishable from that of a real human being.



Yellow Apple (1987) by Susan Wides.

One could argue that "World of Wax" participates in what Eco sees as a specific facet of hyperreality—the lack of orienting boundaries. Eco suggests that the peculiar power of the wax museum figure is based on the clever use of a mise en scène in which corners, mirrors, and perspectives make it difficult to discern "which side is reality and which is illusion."[4] Additionally, wax museums tend to have a complete disregard for conventional historical categorization, grouping figures by subject—such as movies or religion—and overloading the spectator with a plethora of examples rather than a clear historical narrative. This disrespect for tradition results in an odd democratization—"Marie Antoinette's boudoir is recreated with fastidious attention to detail, but Alice's encounter with the Mad Hatter is done just as carefully."[5] One senses in Eco's essay a rare wistful tone—for the ability of American culture to break from the oppressive history of social hierarchy in Europe. Against a backdrop of U.S.-produced visual culture—from Hollywood to "Dallas" to Superman—the wax museum represents commercialism's power to masquerade the manufactured image as more powerful than the original. In the end wax museums are emblematic of a new age of depthless spectacle.

But through her careful attention to detail, Wides's photographs move in an opposite direction: they authenticate the inauthentic in the wax icon. Wides works from the assumption that the wax origins of her images establish a critical distance from the "authenticity" of these images. As a result, her work evokes a more complex level of interpretation; it explores how wax figures embody American myths. Wides wants to reveal how the unconscious cultural knowledge that any spectator has becomes a critique when he/she laughs at a wax Elvis. The effect of *Pan,* for example, depends on our knowledge that it is an image of Peter Pan and Tinkerbell from the Walt Disney cartoon version. However, *Pan* also explores the perversity of this country's love affair with childhood innocence. A shadowy, childlike figure, Pan himself is deemphasized in the exploration of the macabre surroundings of the wax museum display. Framing and low-key lighting create a mad composition where the once innocent, Barbie-like Tinkerbell parallels a phallic moth in a spider web. On top of this image of threatening fecundity is the prohibitive mesh of the exhibit's wire enclosure. Rather than playing the real against the fake, Wides's work examines the deep-seated origins of our fascination with wax culture: the cultural play between surface innocence and repressive power.

Wides avoids focusing on the "real" people represented in wax. Her central tools are her titles, garish color, and focus. Her ironic titles (*Model Citizen* [1987], *Endless Cycles* [1986], or *News at 11* [1987]) avoid any reference to the star's name, forcing us to focus on the social frame—genres, stereotypes, or myths—that the star's image functions within. In *Yellow Apple* the artist makes a technicolor apple held by Snow White the center of the image, forcing us to interpret the innocence of Snow White in the context of the myth of Adam and Eve. Through high-key lighting and play with color Wides reshapes Disney's tale into a disquieting tale of sexual pleasure.

Ultimately Wides's work offers a more complex vision of American culture than Eco's hyperrealist snobbery does. Eco sees none of the wax figures' capacity for criticism that Wides captures so well when, for example, she superimposes several images of a low-lit wax Elvis, revealing the horrific underside of the American spectacle called "The King." American culture remains for Eco the crass, newly monied cousin dazzled by the glitz of cheap, garish imitations—Ronald Reagan, Liberace, and Marilyn Monroe in wax.

Wides's work is more usefully illuminated by Freedberg's analysis of wax figures and religious iconography in *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response.*[6] In contrast to Eco, Freedberg sees the wax figure as an agent in the withering away of the aura of authenticity, a form that supports a more critical attitude toward representation. Freedberg describes how European religious shrines authenticated figures and events through wax figure presentations, in order to repeat the religious experience by including artifacts from the original "miracle." But for Freedberg the pleasure derived from the wax museum is entirely different: it depends on our knowledge that the wax figures are indeed fake.

Wides constructs a carnivalesque vision of the wax museum of laughter, of excess, and most of all, of offensiveness to the established order—high culture. Her use of soft focus gives an ironic painterly or "serious" edge to this "World of Wax." The subtlety of her artistry lies in her ability to represent the fabrication of the wax figure without overwhelming the viewer's critical skills at detecting the constructed nature of American commercial myths.

Interestingly, Wides's photographs in an upcoming *Premiere* magazine, especially her multi-exposure murals, reveal a shift in her work toward questioning how wax museums chronicle and romanticize history. Where Eco fears that wax museums herald a loss of history, Wides makes manifest the fascinating but usually overlooked popular history contained in the display of wax figures. In her John Wayne photograph she exchanges the bright garish distance of her earlier work for a muted, earth-toned series of superimpositions of one wax figure of Wayne from different perspectives. Due to the soft focus and near sepia color of the multi-image portrait, the photograph resembles a romantic painting celebrating the legend of "the Duke" much like Frederick Remington's heroic works about turn-of-the-century, rough-and-ready frontier life. Yet the borders of the repeated images of the wax museum's "Mojave desert" backdrop do not quite match up. Moreover, the Wayne figure not only is presented from a number of different perspectives, giving it an odd three-dimensionality, but its depiction is so overwhelmed by details that one has to study the photograph intensely to make sense of it. The power of this photograph lies in the disjunction between the iconographic power of the Wayne figure and the disquieting effect of multigenerational images.

Wides's later work exhibits new, but perhaps necessary, contradictions as she becomes involved in the process of history and the gloss of nostalgia that shape our reception of commercial culture. Her new mural-like photographs look more "romantic" and are reminiscent of social-realist idealism. Their beauty and "historical" pageantry suggest an amibivalence on Wides's part, as she seems to yearn for a "truth" in commercial representation.

Even as Wides searches through the history of commercial iconography, her work never becomes a simple authentication of American culture and values. To paraphrase perhaps the most mythic John Wayne film—John Ford's *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962)—when fact becomes legend, we print the legend. Wides's photographs of wax figures expose not only the fictional "authenticity" of wax figures but also, more importantly, the ways in which commercial legends become "facts" of history.

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NOTES

1. Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1977), p. 5.
2. Umberto Eco, "Travels in Hyperreality," in *Travels in Hyperreality, Essays* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), p. 6.
3. Ibid., p. 8.
4. Ibid., p. 13.
5. Ibid., p. 14.
6. See David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (University of Chicago Press, 1989).