

REVIEWS LOS ANGELES

Marie Cosindas

BEL AMI
By Red Cameron



Marie Cosindas, *Sailors, Key West*, 1966, dye-transfer print, 7 3/4 × 9 3/4”.

In an understated and symmetrically precise installation of seven photographs at Bel Ami, the work of Marie Cosindas (1923–2017) provided a meditation on photography as a craft of patient attention and an art of conceptual categorization. The story of Cosindas, recounted by Tom Wolfe in her obituary, is that of a soft-spoken yet determined woman who switched from painting to photography at the age of thirty-six, relentlessly phoned Ansel Adams in 1960 to insist upon studying at his workshop, and was then recommended by Adams to Edwin Land in 1962 not long after Land’s invention of the Polaroid process. Having had many of her photographs of celebrities published in magazines in the intervening years, Cosindas leaped to her first solo show of Polaroid prints in 1966 at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Yet her photographs don’t appear to twenty-first-century eyes as necessarily deserving of such instant acclaim and windswept success. At this distance, the work looks very much of its time. The focus appears loose, the lighting dim, and the exposure long. Makeup and dress seem period appropriate, and the colors somehow radiate television, the space age, *Life* magazine, Cambodia, polyester, civil rights, chemistry, radiation itself.

But it is there, in color, that Cosindas’s work, both then and now, achieves its subtle effects. While the prints on display at Bel Ami were made in the 1980s from 1960s negatives and were thus not period Polaroids, they still maintained some of what Wolfe, in 1978, termed “a glow and creamy richness quite unlike anything that had been seen in color photography up to that time.” As an example, in *Untitled (Sitter)*,

1966, the silk of a burgundy blouse mirrors the highlight on the model's painted nails otherwise shadowed in bloodred tones mutely echoed by the lush Persian rug in which she is enveloped. In *Untitled* (all works cited, 1966), the relative tan on two musclemen is discernible from the kraft-paper background, and a terra-cotta blanket thrown over a pedestal contrasts with the sheen of chocolate and turquoise briefs tightly containing ample bulges. In *Paula Nude*, the warmth of light on a young girl's body splits the difference between the sunflower-brown corduroy pillow on which she sits and the ripe pink roses atop her head. As it was broadly for much of the '60s, sex seemed queerly present in these images. Not vulgarly or explicitly so, but as an aesthetic and as an availability. The eyes of the two shirtless young men in *Sailors, Key West*—open, curious, yearning, and attached to bodies slightly flexed and on display—set the quiet mood. These are not accidents but effects of skilled technique and a patient application of lighting, set decoration, costuming, filters, heat, exposure, and time applied not only to the scene, but to the material of the Polaroid itself. Color films all have a manufactured “balance,” and a photographer adjusts hue against it in much the same way a poet manipulates meaning in relation to a norm. Any deviation from the standard is for the purpose of a desired effect. Yet the question remains: an effect in the service of what, exactly?

That the subjects of Cosindas's photographs seem so distinctly placed within the time of their making is perhaps one answer, and the thin distinction between these images looking like the 1960s and the 1960s looking like these images is perhaps another. A camera clearly documents its subjects, but the appearance of a photograph is determined as much by what is invisibly placed behind, around, and alongside the lens as by anything before it. Cosindas was by her own admission chasing the “look” of paintings through Polaroids, and the conservatism of her subject matter (studio portraits and still lifes) suggests an artist in search of a modern means of determining the look of her subjects and the look of her own time. The fact that her portrait of Andy Warhol is recognizably famous, while the name Marie Cosindas frankly is not, speaks to Giacomo Leopardi's realization nearly two hundred years ago, in the decade of the daguerreotype's development, that fashion and death are sisters, both born of decay.