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INTERVIEW CHRISTOPHER MICHAEL

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NEW YORK, MAY 2014

CHRISTOPHER MICHAEL: I suppose most people start with the moment they discovered their passion for photography, but, in your case, it seems more appropriate to begin with the moment you recognized your own fascination with the relationship between humans and technology, and the endless possibility of their union in visual content.

TIM RICHARDSON: Maybe it's fitting that we start this conversation by acknowledging the death of HR Giger, the mad Swiss who shaped our notion of "biomechanical." The body and technology were a visceral, sexual hybrid in his images. Technology that was wet and organic—beyond any simple cyber image. His pictures transported you to a darkly sensual and gothic relationship with technology. A post-futurism that fascinated and repelled simultaneously—that perfect level of discomfort where recognition and fear meet. The first time I was exposed to Giger was on a rented VHS tape of *Alien*. I wasn't allowed into the cinema yet, so I had to wait for the home-video experience. By then, I was eight years old and scared beyond the point of speech. But, again, it was that gothic turn—that femininity that lay at the heart of Giger's "ideology"—that kept me watching, addicted to the potential of the next scene. Maybe this was the beginning. My perception of the body was always about creation. How to use and misuse the tools at hand. How to reinvent the machine. The process. Creation is transformation. It's a kind of freedom that is the journey in pictures.

CM: When you put it that way, the general perception of technology as something void of any human characteristics—much less any that are sexual—finds itself challenged. Having spent time exploring and nurturing your own relationship with this idea, this approach, what have you discovered along the way that may otherwise remain unnoticed by the untrained eye? You certainly manage to bring life to a hyper-techno aesthetic that would otherwise feel cold.

TR: For me, technology is another way of seeing, to imagine. Painting was the first visual technology that affected me. It was a medium that underwent its own revolution. From figuration to abstraction, it was the means to a futurist end—the chosen process to visualize an individual universe. Like painting, photography was also liberated from its initial purpose—representation. Personally, I feel the medium of photography is now, more than ever, a process of image-making. The notion of photography has expanded to incorporate multiple visual technologies that now render the human figure spatially—a fully three-dimensional realization more akin to sculpture than photography. This tension between figurative tradition and technology is where I see the beauty and sensuality. The warmth. My images are about creating a symbolic remix; a process that unifies technology with the emotive and very physical presence of the figure.

CM: It's an interesting connection between the process of creating a painting and that of creating an image. In years past, this statement would have been far more metaphorical than anything, but today, the comparison has actually become quite literal. Your work has always toyed with the futuristic and embraced digital progress, but with the current access to three-dimensional imagery and all of the new doors that have opened with it, do you find your relationship to the subject or model element is also changing?

TR: Now, more than ever, I connect to the physicality of the subject. Each model's unique ability to move, emote, and seduce is amplified by the fact that I can translate his or her performance three-dimensionally. This opens my process to a sculptural approach. My "sight," or point of view, has been freed from a direct relationship with the camera. I can revisit the subject from limitless perspectives during and after the shoot. This is a unique liberation of the two-dimensional image from the lens that has altered my process and relationship to the subject completely.

CM: What is the driving force behind the interest in altering the texture of skin and introducing other aesthetics—even fabrics or materials such as the metallics—throughout this book? Is your woman a cyborg?

TR: My muse isn't a single figure or form. The first project I did with Nicola Formichetti was a collaboration on our "digital muse"—a woman beyond a single moment. She is the zeitgeist—a sensual projection of femininity—sometimes as an electric mirage, sometimes as a liquid-metal predatory figure. She is the sample. The remix. The dance floor. [Laughs]

CM: Now that was a series of really great pull quotes. They need to be splashed across pages in beautiful font. Do you believe this relationship between model and technology is something that will become a continually explored subject? Or do you think it's incredibly contemporary in the way that it very much belongs to the now, and will be something specific to this time ten years from now?

TR: Love a solid quote... Several companies are already developing systems to create three-dimensional holograms of celebrity figures and models, like the latest version of Michael Jackson or Tupac. Whether they've been a success is open for debate, but it is evolving continually within multiple genres of image-making, from art to commerce. What I find most interesting is the effect three-dimensional technology has on our experience of the image. Social expectations of technology and its ability to stimulate us are evolving as fast as the technology. Like cinema, fashion has been forced to keep up. From virtual catwalks to installations, film, and print, the application of 3-D has already taken hold. It can only improve.

CM: This is true, and the timing is quite funny, as a major publication—which will remain nameless for the purpose of our dialogue—has recently started working on an entire project of 3-D printing. The project is meant to run digitally, across its social media platforms, as well as in the physical realm of its print pages, and to travel for different shoots. The timing on this leads me to agree with your train of thought, as it's now being explored by even mass-market and more commercial platforms. I think most people's first thought, when hearing about such technology, is to apply it to the moving image, like film, but it's now something that people can experience in stills without needing to put on special glasses. Will you continue to explore this language in film as much as in still images? Or are those two mediums one and the same, in a sort of simultaneous way, for you?

TR: Personally, film and photography have become a simultaneous visual language. The technology is definitely there to unify the two mediums. This is what intrigues me most—the transformative potential of technology. The ability to change the way we make and experience images. There is a creative violence inherent to this process—in breaking down old methods to find new ones. It's an experimental method that has led me to create a symbolic friction between futurist and classical motifs in my imagery. Technology is the filter for that friction—a way to simultaneously explode and embrace artistic traditions.

CM: If it's true that everything is given meaning through contrast, then the friction of which you speak is perhaps what prevents your work from feeling cold or void of any human emotion.

TR: That friction is at the core of the work. It's about the relationship between sensation and vision. The developments in technology we've been discussing are all efforts to project the human experience digitally—basically, to leave our bodies behind. My work focuses on reconnecting that division—finding a relationship with technology that unifies the experience. Maybe that's what draws me to the body, the figure, the texture of skin. The simple sense of touch, in some ways, is the last physical domain left to us.

CM: In that way, it creates quite a fantastic and sensual voyage into the realm of new possibility. Do you think it takes away anything in the process?

TR: If anything, creating that tension—exploring the duality of body and technology—liberates my process. In a way, my process is also the purpose of this book: to engage with several genres of image-making to reveal the universal nature of our relationship to technology. The images and film I recently made with Tao Okamoto explore the figure through both genre and technology. Fashion provides the context. Tao's presence provides the orientation—the cultural moment.

I chose to create a monumental sculptural representation of Tao's features; a figurative approach made possible through three-dimensional scanning technology. This was my way of channeling the iconography of celebrity. A friction of classicism and futurism, within the creative crucible of fashion.

CM: How did you come to your decision on the title for this book?

TR: The title is a mirror for the central theme of the book—the interplay of our physical and digital selves. We live in a moment in human history in which the traditions we have taken for granted, socially and culturally, are being challenged on every level. This is the crucible of technology, where communication itself can be an art form—a kind of high-speed sculpture expressed through online and social media platforms. All creative forms are being pushed through the online filter—a point of intersection made all the more unstable by the way technology liberates the message, pushing it past the traditional venues. There is a bypass happening—a fluidity of exchange that opens the mediums in which we work to new influences. Remember, we were just talking today about the resistance of tradition. Tradition is just an idea of established processes—of acceptance. The title of the book is a deliberate duality, an allegory for the point where tradition embraces the contemporary moment. It's about belonging to your own time.

Tim Richardson

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Spiritual Machine

Gebundenes Buch mit Schutzumschlag, 144 Seiten, 24,0 x 32,0 cm
53 farbige Abbildungen, 15 s/w Abbildungen
ISBN: 978-3-7913-8151-0

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Erscheinungstermin: April 2015

Der Titel im Katalog