2005 First Place Critical Analysis

Defining Experience: Dominance of Reality or Desire

Rodney Smith probes the space between desire and experience in his photograph “Bernadette Twirling.” In one interpretation of this photograph, Smith develops the differences and commonalities between desire and experience by fusing the two into one scene through representing desire as a pleasurable daydream. A concise understanding of the relationship between desire and experience entails an understanding of what experience is. In this situation, is experience the physical reality, the dream, or a mixture of both? This picture, of a lone woman in a beautiful white dress twirling inside a spaciously empty room, captures a blissful daydream of desire. This photograph seems to express a longing to step into a time when this room was filled with dancing, laughing figures. In essence, this photograph captures the scene of one woman dreaming, but is this dream portrayed as true “experience”? Smith develops the relationship between desire and experience through the setup of this shot, the lighting contrasts, and the reflective imagery.

The staging for a photograph generally defines the purpose of the shot. For example, a genial family portrait would congregate everyone together in a warm, colorful scene of love and companionship. In like manner, the setting of this picture and the choice of medium for “Bernadette Twirling” lay the foundation for an exploration of the space between desire and experience. Such an exploration seems deeply personal in nature and is thus enhanced by the atmosphere of privacy that this picture exudes. In this photograph, both the large size of the photograph and the relatively small size of the model set a backdrop of solitude for the development of themes. By enhancing the empty space captured therein, Smith appears to imply that the rest of the room, or even the whole house, is empty while Bernadette partakes in her private reverie. Also, the setting of the photograph can give rise to the feeling that the daydream is pleasurable because Bernadette has a magnificent setting of wealth in which to imagine herself.
One critical aspect of this photograph is the medium by which it is presented, a black-and-white print. Like most black-and-white photography, lighting contrasts convey a great deal of the photograph’s ambience and underlying meaning. Because this picture is in black and white, the light coming from the windows is more easily recognizable as being in the same focal plane as the subject of the photograph, thus becoming part of the photograph’s positive space. The eye tends to associate the subject with things directly touching it, and thus the positive space for the photograph becomes inclusive of the light emanating from the window. If this photograph were in color, not only would the balance of positive to negative space be harder to perceive, but the viewers might not understand the significance of this balance between elements of the photograph. In “Bernadette Twirling,” lighting contrasts parallel the dual nature of experience as physical and spiritual. It appears foundational for the contrast of physical reality to dreaming that the positive space, or subject, of the photo is connected with the light; it enhances the idea that dreaming is a great part of the entire picture, which could represent experience as a whole.

This association between the dreamer and the dream, or Bernadette and the light, becomes clearer as one analyzes the lighting for this photograph. The darker aspects of this image appear more concrete and real to the eye. The elements of this picture that convey a solid sense of physical reality include most of the room, parts of the back of the model, and the apartment buildings seen across the street, which are all darker in contrast to the rest of the photograph. In the midst of this beautiful scene of blissful twirling, the drab reality of apartments peek through the windows, perhaps reminding the viewer of the physical reality of most living conditions. Smith presents a scene with substantial reality mostly emanating from the dark, beautiful architecture that saturates the room. Yet, the windows on the right of this room break the continuity of an almost enveloping corporeal reality.

In this picture, the model Bernadette is facing the light, which streams through these windows. The light itself seems representational of her delightful fancy. With her graceful twirl, and in this majestic setting, one could easily feel transported into a delightful daydream of days past, when this room was filled with jovial people dancing in an elegant fashion. Based on orientation and hazy facial expression (which appears to carry a smile), the viewer may conclude that Bernadette has opened herself to the light of this dream. As Bernadette
twirls, the parts of her figure that appear to blur into realms of the imagination are lighter. These include areas of her dress, face, and arms that are oriented towards this light. Indeed, except for a small area of shadowing, her whole figure appears bathed in light.

As the viewer concludes that Bernadette has opened herself to this dream because her face and figure are blurred into the light of the sun, the viewer may also notice this lighting effect causes Bernadette’s features to be somewhat indistinguishable, or anonymous. This anonymity lends the dream of timeless beauty a degree of universality. In fact, one may make the conclusion that Rodney Smith intends the themes of his photography to be universalized because of the title of his exhibit, “Adam’s Dream,” which suggests implications for all mankind, Adam’s children. In this way, Bernadette’s “dream” is representational of the universal spiritual, i.e. non-physical, experience of desire.

Still, physical reality and dream appear almost to fuse together in the classic architecture of this room marvelously filled with designs of angels and flowers. In this photograph, one of the dim electric candles in the chandelier may have gone out, but Bernadette glows! Light shimmers over most of the surface of Bernadette’s figure, yet the viewer still sees the shadows on her back most completely and directly. Thus, there appears to be a great balance in this portrait between light and dark, or dreams and reality, and in many cases both elements contribute to the whole “experience” that this picture impresses upon the viewer. In a way, there appears a synergy of reality and dream, as splendor becomes experience in the beauty of this setting.

Both the dark, enveloping mansion and Bernadette’s sunbathed figure are easily categorized as attractive. This desire for the beauty and grace of antiquity appears underlying for the whole of the photograph. As Bernadette’s graceful legs appear to melt into the light, which scatters upon the floor at her feet, Bernadette appears spiritually lifted out of reality into a sublime daydream. Yet, beauty is also foundational for the dark, corporeal structure of the marbled walls and paneled floors of this posh mansion. Thus, the universal similarities in beauty can challenge the viewer to note more subtle differences between the Bernadette’s dream and physical reality.

These differences between desires and corporeal realities are highlighted in the reflective imagery of this photo. The viewer can only see the front of Bernadette, which is infused with a dreamy light, in the mirror. This
reflected image does not show the stark emptiness of the room in which she twirls. Rather, the reflected image lends itself to a much grander dream. The reflected image stands in light, silvery contrast to the darkness of the room itself. As Bernadette twirls, one can almost picture Bernadette’s mirror image in the middle of a ballroom crowded with elegantly dancing figures.

In this reflective image, stark contrasts of light and dark suggest an interpretation of dreaming behind bars of physical reality. The mirror image of Bernadette appears surreal because there are no significant lighting contrasts in the mirror. Yet, this mirror image is crisscrossed with the black frame of the mirror. The reflective dream seems contained in a cage of dark reality. Likewise, the windows themselves are made up of squares that seem to interrupt the dream experience contained in the squares of light. The light on the floor is segmented between lines of shadows, and even Bernadette’s dress and arms are laced with shadows from the frame of the windows. These black lines of reality remind the viewer that a spiritual reality of desire cannot exist without a physical one. On the other hand, the substance of the picture appears to be that which is contained in the mere “frame” of physical reality, giving emphasis to the dream reality.

The most meaningful aspect of this reflective imagery appears to be the production of a twin for Bernadette. Whereas the similarities of identical twins are readily apparent, Smith apparently favors photographs that feature twins because they prompt the viewer to look for differences. Thus, this reflective image of Bernadette appears critical to the meaning of this photograph because it directly explores the differences between reality and desires expressed through dreaming. First off, the mirror image of Bernadette appears to be the dream image because it is the figure more fully bathed in light, and this mirrored image contains more ethereal blurring, suggestive of dreaming. Whereas the corporeal Bernadette is in an empty room, the mirror image of Bernadette does not capture this empty space, and one is left to dream that perhaps Bernadette’s mirrored room is filled with people. On the other hand, the real figure of Bernadette is larger than the dream, just as daydreaming would not threaten the existence of physical reality. This larger figure of Bernadette has shadowing on her back that, despite the suggested daydreaming, hints that she is still connected with reality to some degree.
To determine the relationship between desire and experience, the viewer must decide whether the corporeal reality or the dream (desired) reality is the true “experience” of the subject. At first glance, the physical image of Bernadette is larger than the mirrored image, and therefore the main focus as the subject of the photograph appears to be the corporeal Bernadette. Thus, one might assume that Smith portrays physical reality as the real “experience.” On the other hand, both twins exhibiting a surface area predominantly brighter than the rest of the photograph would suggest a predominance of desire, through dreaming, as the true “experience” of the subject.

Rodney Smith presents a definition of experience in his photograph “Bernadette Twirling.” The apparent conclusion is that both physical reality and desire contribute to experience. If one is transported by desire (through art, daydream, imagination, etc.) to an experience of sublime beauty, then he or she has had an experience arguably as real as anything physical. Yet, like the shadows on her back or the frame for the mirror, one can never completely escape physical reality. “Bernadette Twirling” explores the space between desire and experience through the setup of this shot, lighting contrasts, and reflective imagery. In considering this photo, the viewer may ultimately come to the conclusion that life’s “experience” is determined largely, but not solely, by desires or dreams.