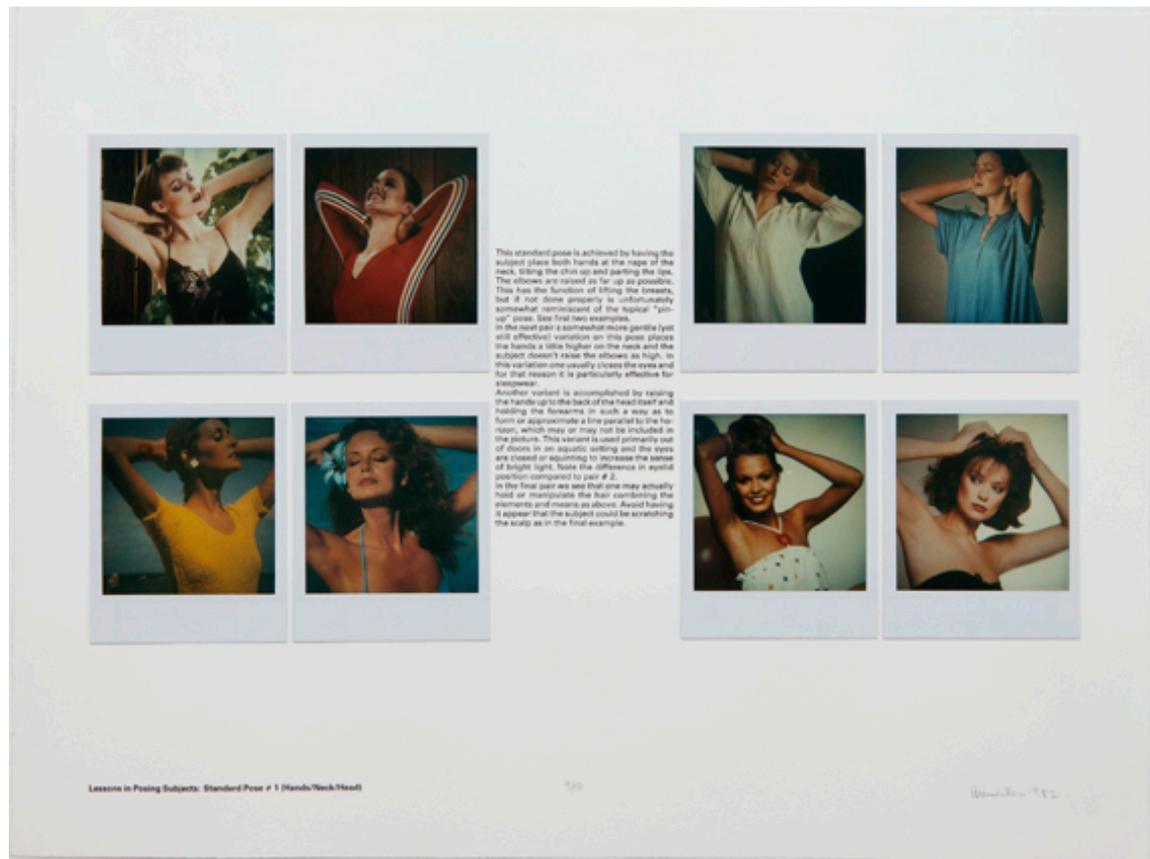


Williams, Eliza. "Robert Heinecken: Lessons In Posing Subjects," *Creative Review Blog*, November 12, 2014

# CreativeReview

Advertising, design and visual culture



US artist Robert Heinecken rose to prominence in the late 60s, creating photo collages that explored questions of sexuality and consumerism. His work often proved controversial during his lifetime but is being reappraised now in a series of exhibitions, including a show at Open Eye Gallery in Liverpool. We talk to curator Devrim Bayar about Heinecken's work, and whether it could still prove objectionable to feminists...

Heinecken described himself as a "paraphotographer," because while photography was always central to his work, he was interested in exploring the medium as a subject in itself, and created works in a number of forms, including sculpture, video and collage. Earlier this year, a major retrospective at MoMA in New York looked at work from throughout Heinecken's career, yet the show at Open Eye (which originally appeared at Weils contemporary art centre in Brussels) hones in on a particular period, when he was creating artworks using a Polaroid SX-70 camera. Titled "Lessons In Posing Subjects," the series repurposes images from popular culture to explore the way female sexuality is used to fuel consumerism. This is the first time this body of work has been shown in its entirety in the UK.

"The exhibition concentrates on technique," Explains Bayar, curator of the show at Weils and Open Eye, "the use of the Polaroid SX-70 and how Heinecken subverted this widely popular technology. In 1972, when the SX-70 was launched, it enjoyed immediate success in the general public as well as in artist circles. It was the first easy-to-use camera that instantly produced colour prints. As a first step, Heinecken used the SX-70 like everybody else: to make snapshots of his wife, their intimacy etc. Very quickly though, he started re-photographing existing images, and more specifically, photos of mannequins in mail-order magazines and pornographic magazines.

## Cherry and Martin

“By photographing them with his Polaroid camera, Heinecken gives them a natural appearance, spontaneous, whereas these images are completely artificial. With this new tool, Heinecken explored important notions such as biography vs. fiction, true vs. false, and reality vs. representation, which is what the show hopes to emphasize.”



She: Were you in the service?  
He: Yes, in the Marine Corps.  
She: That's strange. What did you do?  
He: I was a fighter pilot.  
She: How exciting, but how have you made use of that experience as an artist?  
He: It taught me how to concentrate. How to disregard logic in making decisions. How to be afraid. And how to drink.

Conversations about art + artists **DUPLICATED** From He/She series. (#9) Heinecken '80

## Cherry and Martin

While in his earlier work, Heinecken tended to work with photography as a subject, rather than taking shots himself, with the arrival of the Polaroid SX-70, this changed. "During his entire artistic career, Heinecken challenged the idea that photographic images are transparent windows onto the world," continues Bayar. "Instead he tackled their materiality in order to make apparent the latent content of the mass media: war, violence, pornography, sexuality, consumerism, etc. To paraphrase Heinecken's own words, 'the photograph is not a picture of something, but an object about something.' Heinecken experimented with a large variety of techniques to tackle materiality of photographic images, such as collage, lithography, photograms, etc. The use of the Polaroid SX-70 camera is thus only one of the steps in his ever experimental approach. However it is quite a surprising one, as Heinecken was known for working with photographic images without ever using a camera... It thus corresponded to quite a radical change of method."



Objectification of women was a central subject in Heinecken's work, though his preoccupation with it raised the ire of feminists when it first appeared, who denounced the artist as a misogynist. For Bayar, this is a complex issue. "I think that this view has changed but there are still people who feel his work is complacent with the objectification of women in mass media," she says. "Having researched his work extensively and been in contact with several people who were close to the artist, I am convinced that Heinecken's images, as seducing as they are, are strongly critical and engaged. As the artist himself replied, with his deadpan sense of humor, to a journalist who called him a 'misogynist photographer,' he said he wasn't sure 'whether to be more insulted at being called a misogynist or a photographer.' I think this sums up quite well his way of thinking."

Bayar sees Heinecken's exploration of the blurred lines between reality and fiction in photography as being especially pertinent today, when we live in a world of constant self-documentation. But whereas Heinecken was keen to point out the codes hidden in imagery, and thus the falsehoods, today we are inclined to disguise ourselves in a fiction more than ever. "Today, everyone can photograph their life with a click of an iPhone and give their images any filter thanks to special applications on smartphones and computers," she explains. "In a certain way, it's the inverse phenomenon which produces itself: we give our life an artificial look. These images can then instantly circulate around the internet and be shared with the entire world. Thanks to new technologies the phenomenon of recontextualisation of images, be they private or public, is exponential. Heinecken's work announced this phenomenon of decontextualisation, the growing ambiguity between reality and fiction in photographic images and the culture of selfies in which we live in."

*Robert Heinecken: Lessons In Posing Subjects is on show at Open Eye Gallery in Liverpool until January 11 2015.*