

## Outliers

# Marcia Resnick: Revisiting *Re-visions*

Larry Lytle

"...Don't you want to tell me of those little pranks of yours in camp?"

"You talk like a book, *Dad*."

"What have you been up to? I insist you tell me."

"Are you easily shocked?"

"No. Go on."

—Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita*

**As we browse** at a bookstore, a mere glance lets us know what kind of book we'll be paging through. We depend on its cover to give us a clue. However, the more conceptual the book the more difficult it is to figure out what we'll discover between the covers. This is particularly true for the four slender volumes, produced in the 1970s, by artist-photographer Marcia Resnick, which for many reasons elude classification.

Resnick's books, along with the many other artists who understood the possibilities, are



Marcia Resnick

the evolved results presented in Robert Frank's U. S. publication of *The Americans* in 1959. Frank's book is important for marking a sea change in documentary photography while disseminating the idea that a book can be a container of photographs that delivers a single, complex, conceptual conceit.

Although there had been photography books created as an end in themselves, like the surreal 1929 book *Beyond this Point*, a collaboration between photographer Francis Bruguière and poet Lance Sieveking, this innovative approach to thinking about books as standalone artwork didn't catch on until Ed Ruscha self-published his seminal 1963 book, *Twentysix Gasoline Stations*. This momentous change in making books took hold for a number of reasons, the most important simply that of being in the right place at the right time. (As a side note, the right place and time had already happened in Japan in 1954, when Shohachi Kimura and Yoshikazu Suzuki produced the boxed set *Ginza Kaiwai/Ginza Hacho*—see *Various Small Books* published by MIT Press.)

The events and ideologies of the 1960s shook apart more than societal structures, they gave voice to a new group of artists who studied the early 20th century art provocateur Marcel Duchamp. Artists like Andy Warhol assaulted and ultimately broke down the seemingly unbreachable barrier between high art and commercial art. The book was one of those methods of assault, utilized by painters,

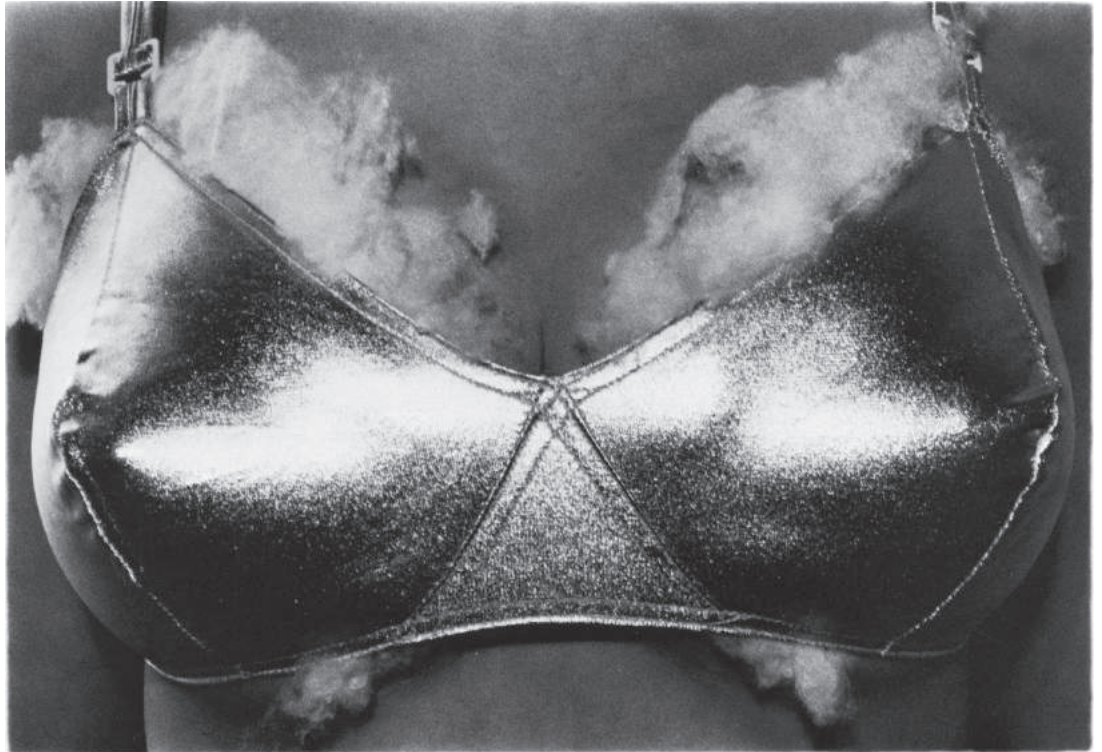


*She imagined herself a starlet.*



*They were continually telling her that she had stars in her eyes.*

Resnick's books resound with sly wit as she disassembles the documentary nature of photography and infuses a gentle and humane sense of humor into her observations of the human condition.



*She developed slowly but learned how to stuff her bra so that both sides matched.*

printmakers, sculptors and photographers as yet another medium to make involved artwork. Non-photo-based artists during this period of change also realized the potential for conveying their ideas through photography as a medium. The momentum intensified in the 1970s as blue-chip artists began concentrating on photography, or used it in combination with their established art medium. This in turn helped collectors, gallerists, critics, museums and auction houses that had initially championed photography see their efforts pay off. Photography was finally accepted as a bona fide art medium, validated by all inhabitants of the art world. Resnick, who had originally studied painting, drawing and graphic design, became a participant in photography's new age.

**Resnick was born** in Brooklyn, New York in 1950. Her mother was a practiced and adept painter and her father was both a journalist and a print shop owner who, coincidentally, sold painting sets by the beloved television artist John Gnagy. It was through her mother's influence that Resnick became a painter; her father's gift to her was a love for writing. Resnick received her BFA from Cooper Union, where she had taken on photography as another one of her well-developed art

practices. After attending a talk by Allan Kaprow, a professor and representative of the newly built California Institute of the Arts (aka Cal Arts), she traveled to California to pursue her MFA. Her first choice had been UCLA to study with Robert Heineken. But it was at Cal Arts that Resnick earned her MFA and instructed, as part of her assistantship, the classes "Fun with Photography," "Son of Fun With Photography" and "The Return of Son of Fun With Photography," which introduced her students to alternative photography methods and media—as well as her offbeat sense of humor.

It was, once again, a case of being in the right place at the right time that Resnick chose Cal Arts to pursue her advanced degree. The campus was known for a kind of freewheeling education that embraced open experimentation and, as co-founder Walt Disney wrote, "...a kind of cross-pollination that would develop the best in its students." Serendipitously, Resnick got the best of Cal Arts and UCLA—Heineken became a friend and mentor; Cal Arts exposed her to a heady mixture of artists and thinkers: John Baldessari, Lynda Benglis and Resnick's graduate advisor, Ben Lifson a photographer, writer and historian who created Cal Arts' nascent photography department.



*While playing with her toys, she entertained cowgirl fantasies.*



*She was horrified to learn that she had been walking around school all day with her skirt hiked up in the back.*

In its subtle and subversive way, *Re-visions* becomes in its 47 combinations of words and images, an unromanticized feminist take on womanhood.

Upon leaving California, Resnick returned to New York for a teaching job at Queens College in New York. She produced the series *Landscape* and *See* as she traveled across the U. S., and *Tahitian Eve* when she made a trip to Tahiti to photograph its women and landscape. Resnick's subject matter over the years has always balanced between people and landscapes, and has often combined both. Although she didn't consider herself a portrait photographer, she admits to being a keen observer of body language. This self-deprecating assessment is belied by the excellent portraits work done in her latest book, *Punks, Poets & Provocateurs: New York Bad Boys 1977-1982*, (Insight Editions, 2015).

While Resnick's first three books—*Landscape*, *See* and *Tahitian Eve*—were self-published simultaneously in 1975, they were shot separately and with the purpose of becoming books. In 1977, Resnick embarked on another book project, *Landscape-Loftscape*, which instead became a print series. Unfortunately, when it went to press in 1977 the printer absconded with the money, and the book was

never produced. Resnick used previously photographed landscapes, and with playful props, or collaged paper and paint reconstructed the images in miniature, photographing them in her loft space. The paired photographs, the actual landscape and its doppelgänger, are shown side-by-side pointing out the foible of accepting a photograph as a true representation of the thing depicted.

Resnick's books, even her series that weren't bound, resound with sly wit as she disassembles the documentary nature of photography and infuses a gentle and humane sense of humor into her observations of the human condition. This approach is revealed in an anecdote she relates about the genesis of *Landscape*. "I was inspired to make *Landscape* when I went on a trip to Ansel Adams' house. He had a library filled with photography books, including one of my favorites. It was Lucas Samaras' book of 'Auto-Polaroids.' I opened it up, and written in Adams' handwriting was, 'This is not photography.' So, I was inspired to do a book with minimal alternatives to Adams' elaborate landscapes and begin it with: 'If beautiful landscapes could be eaten, they would be photographed much less.'" [Michel Tournier, *The Ogre*]

Apart from that inadvertent moment of inspiration, one may wonder why Resnick decided to use a book format to convey her ideas. "I really like the fact that the book form is a democratic way of dispersing art," she explains. "Anybody can look at a book in their own time and space and place. I like the proportion of a book and the intimacy with photographs it provides. I also enjoy how the sequencing of images on the pages, including leaving some pages empty, provides the pacing."

It was an experimental film, sequencing a voiced-over description of burning photographs, made by one of her professors, Hollis Frampton at Cooper Union, that inspired Resnick's manipulation of editorial pacing. Along with her fine sense of picture editing, one notices that her first three books lack any written narration, captions or titles. At the beginning of *Landscape* and *See* Resnick opens with a quote, which becomes the intellectual starting point for the proceeding images. In *Tahitian Eve*, there is only a dedication to "P.G."—Paul Gauguin, a small clue that explains much as we compare Resnick's posed photographs of modern Tahitian



DURING THE VICTORIAN ERA, THERE WAS AN EXTREMELY ROTUND LADY OF FINERY, WHO TRAVELED WITH TWO MALE SERVANTS. ONCE, AT THE OPERA, THE SERVANTS DEVISED A METHOD OF HELPING THE PORTLY DOWAGER EXPRESS HER ENTHUSIASM FOR THE PERFORMANCE BY GENTLY LIFTING HER WIG FROM ATOP HER HEAD, FLIPPING IT IN THE AIR AND RETURNING IT TO HER HEAD. OVER THE YEARS, THE RABBLE, IN ITS OBSESSIVE AND INSENSITIVE DESIRE FOR MONEY AND POWER, HAVE APPROPRIATED AND MISINTERPRETED THE FINE MANNERS OF THE RICH. THEY BOUGHT CHEAP WIGS IN THE MARKETPLACES AND FLIPPED THEM WITH THEIR OWN HANDS TO EXPRESS EXCESSIVE FEELINGS OF NOT ONLY APPROVAL, BUT ALL KINDS OF ENTHUSIASM, INCLUDING OUTRAGE. TODAY, "FLIPPING ONE'S WIG" REFERS TO THE LATTER DISTORTED PHENOMENON AND IS AGAIN BECOMING A POPULAR FAD. WIG SALES HAVE SKYROCKETED. PEOPLE RIDING IN THE SUBWAYS, WATCHING ROCK'N'ROLL SHOWS AND JUST WALKING DOWN THE STREETS HAVE TAKEN TO "FLIPPING THEIR WIGS" AND THEN DOING DRASTIC THINGS FROM "RESNICK'S BELIEVE-IT-OR-NOT"

MARCIA RESNICK



*See #4, 1974*



*See #12, 1974*

*Re-visions*, like *Lolita*, tells the story through the single reconstructed memory of its narrator.



*She became an expert shoplifter.*

women and landscapes against the colonial vision of Gauguin's painted turn-of-the-century paradise.

**The intentional lack** of verbiage changed in Resnick's fourth book, *Re-visions*, published in 1978 by Coach House Press, an independent Canadian publisher. The book is a continuation of Resnick's interest in deconstructing documentation through the use of artist-constructed space, but instead of using the outside world as her subject, she turns inward.

The idea for *Re-visions* came about after a major car accident, during which, she says, her life "flashed before my eyes." While recuperating in the hospital, Resnick thought in detail about her life. "I began making lists of the different photographs I'd like to make that corresponded to certain memories I had growing up."

*Re-visions*, for its straightforward text and disarmingly simple photographs, is a subtly complex book. In short, it's a reminiscence chronicling a girl's physical and emotional changes while she sorts out life during puberty. In interviews, Resnick has acknowledged that these memories are hers: some recounted as she remembered it, some with the truth a bit stretched. The clinically delivered text describes her newly encountered insights, memories, descriptions or revelations, while

the photographs act as metaphoric illustrations. The words and pictures work in concert to form the narrative. The book invites us to uncomfortably *and* comfortably chuckle at some of the scenarios, and appreciate the artful representation of the peccadillos and embarrassing moments that we've all experienced growing up. (Resnick recounted in an interview an instance of sexual confusion when a boy called her a "cocktease" during her early adolescence.)

In a subtle and subversive way, *Re-visions* becomes, in its 47 combinations of words and images, an un-romanticized feminist take on womanhood. This is made more obvious when one contemplates well-respected photographic monographs like Garry Winogrand's *Women Are Beautiful*, or Judy Dater's and Jack Welpott's *Women and Other Visions*, both published in 1975.

The cover of *Re-visions* has a color portrait of our heroine sporting heart-shaped glasses à la Sue Lyon in the poster for Stanley Kubrick's film version of *Lolita*. (Resnick recruited a student's sister to pose for most of the pictures; Resnick herself stands in for a few.) Our unnamed protagonist is referred to as "She" in the majority of the text, but it is *Lolita* as much as it is Resnick that is being represented here. *Re-visions* is after all dedicated to Humbert Humbert, and more than a third of



*She was often gripped with the desire to be elsewhere.*



*She secretly lusted for her television idols.*



the memories are about sexual awakening. Some of the text and images are humorous references to Nabokov's *Lolita*; others portray the typical thoughts and situations created by the teenage mind.

*Re-visions*, like *Lolita*, tells the story through the single reconstructed memory of its narrator. In *Lolita* the narrator is Humbert as he flashes back and forth between the past and present tense. In *Re-visions* Resnick uses an omniscient third person narrator to tell the story solely in the past tense. Both books raise the question of time's effect on memory. In the case of *Lolita*, Humbert is for most of the book recalling the past several years of his life with and without Lolita. We cannot help but wonder about the accuracy of his obsessive memories, his control over Lolita's history, as he recounts their time together.

*Re-visions* approaches the idea of memory and control over its retelling in a different way. The question of the accuracy of memory is embedded in the book's title, which implies that what we are seeing has been in some way revised. The descriptive text collides against the stripped-down, surreal photograph-

ic interpretation; the memory conjured between description and vision is temperamentally at odds. The heroine appears at times to be a girl, at other times a woman.

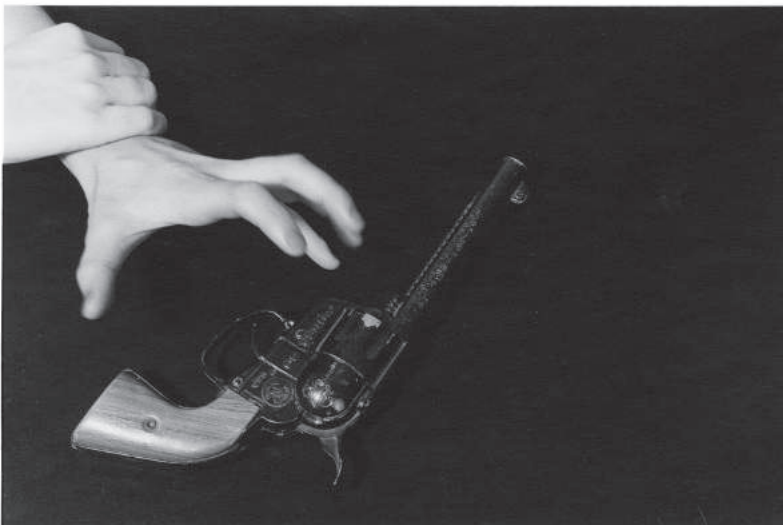
Because Resnick uses the third person to tell the story, she is in effect removing herself as the narrator. We are left wondering if the story is a generalized take on the angst of growing up, the memories of the artist who created the book, or a little of both? In Resnick's presentation of memory we encounter a hall of mirrors, an implication that any reconstruction of the past not only may, or may not be true, but in fact may never have happened. *Re-visions* reminds us that a photograph, as a reconstruction of the outside world, presents a false or dubious reality. At the same time the purposeful discord between words and pictures tells us that memories, as real as they may seem, are an unreliable replication of our past.

Resnick continued her use of text, image, puns and humor in a large body of work titled *Resnick's Believe It Or Not* (two of them seen here). They were published for approximately two years in the *Soho Weekly News*. Unfortunately, this body of work hasn't yet been made into a book.

Sadly, Resnick's early books can only be found on eBay or as used books on Amazon. Her prints, however, are available through dealers on the east and west coasts. But to understand the context of her ideas and how they played out in book form, there needs to be a reprint of her four books, particularly *Re-visions*, which turns 40 in 2018 and is, I think, her masterwork. The time has come for a major reevaluation of her work. It can't come too soon.

### Addendum

All images copyright Marcia Resnick. You can explore more of her imagery at [marciarensnick.com](http://marciarensnick.com). Anyone wishing to see or purchase her images must contact either Paul M. Hertzmann, Inc. in San Francisco or Deborah Bell Photographs in New York City. Her latest book is *Punks, Poets & Provocateurs, NYC Bad Boys 1977-1982* (Insight Editions, 2015).



PERFUME IS CONSIDERED AN ESSENTIAL WEAPON IN THE ART OF SEDUCTION. THE MOST POPULAR SCENTS OFTEN REFLECT THE AMBIANCE OF THE TIME IN WHICH THEY WERE CREATED. IN THE WAKE OF THE "LOVE GENERATION," SUCH AROMAS AS PRINCE MACHIAVELLI'S "WIND SONG" WON OVER THE HEARTS AND MINDS OF STAR-CROSSED LOVERS. IN THE WAKE OF THE "DRUG GENERATION," ST. LAURENT'S "OPIUM" BECAME A FASHIONABLE PRODUCT. NOW, WITH THE RAMPANT USE OF ILLEGAL HAND GUNS, REQUESTS BY THE "PACK-A-ROD GENERATION" HAVE BEEN FLOODING PERFUMERIES FOR "LUGER 38," PACKAGED IN THE ATTRACTIVE "SATURDAY NIGHT SPECIAL" ATOMIZER PICTURED HERE. THIS INTOXICATING YET LETHAL SACHET IS AN EXPLOSIVE MIXTURE OF POTASSIUM NITRATE, SULFUR AND CARBON AND IS GUARANTEED TO SLAUGHTER YOUR SENSES, SLAY YOUR SOUL AND BLOW YOUR BRAINS AWAY. FROM "RESNICK'S BELIEVE-IT-OR-NOT" MARCIA RESNICK



*Landscape #14 from "Landscape/Loftscape"*



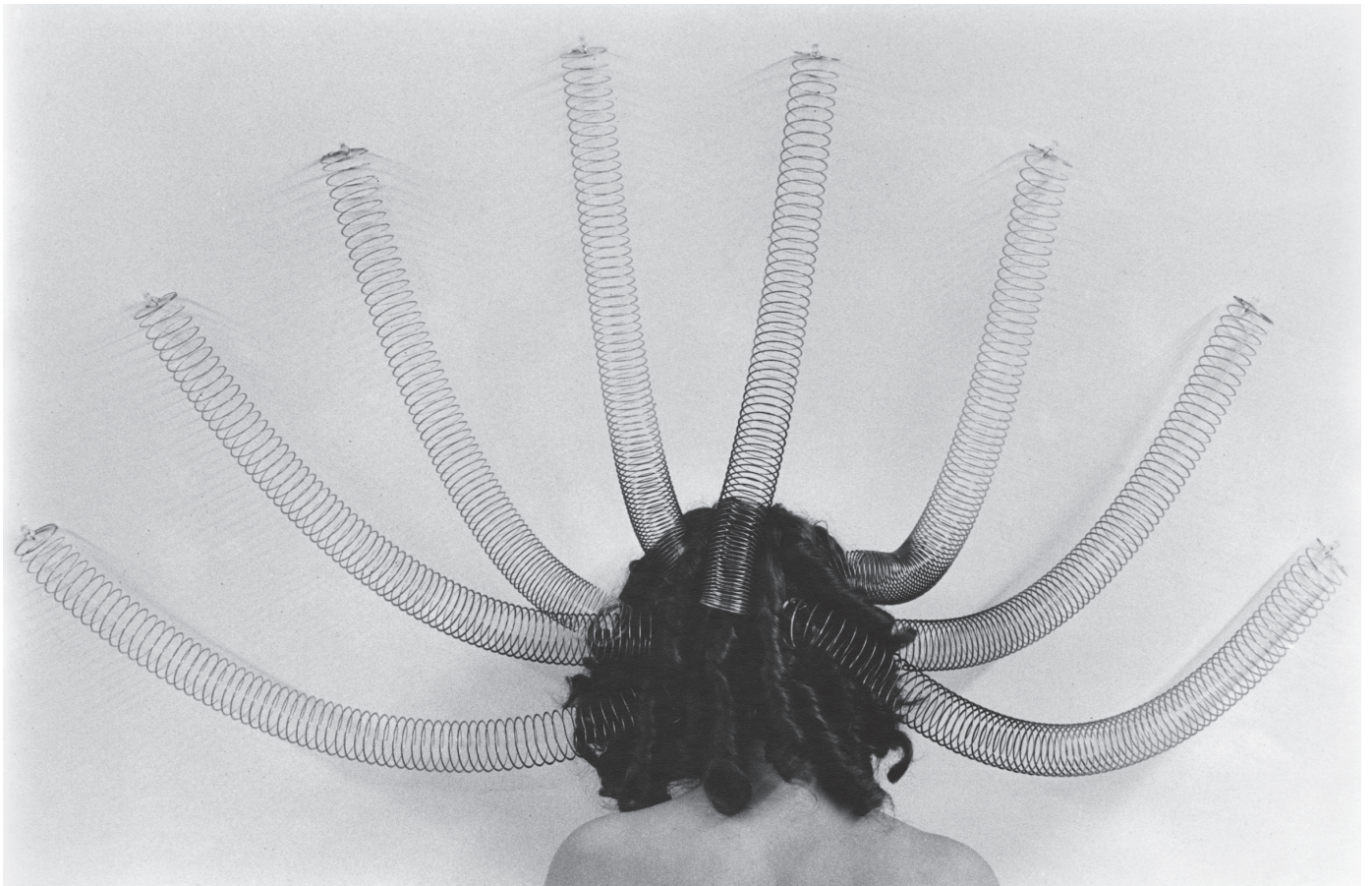
*Loftscape #14 from "Landscape/Loftscape"*



*David Byrne, 1981, from "Punks, Poets & Provocateurs"*



*She was repeatedly told to stop looking at her feet while in the company of adults.*



*She played with her slinky toys and wore banana curls and played with her banana curls and wore her slinky toys.*