

Connie Imboden's BEAUTY OF DARKNESS (Book Review by Martha Casanave, published in the July/August, 2001 issue of PhotoVision magazine)

Some photographers find images everywhere. Then there are photographers like Connie Imboden who seem to pull their images from inside themselves. This work from within has a narrower scope, but deeper origins, than work inspired from outside. To simply describe Imboden's subject matter--- nudes and their reflections in water and mirrors-- gives no idea of what these images really look like or, more importantly, what it is like to experience them. In fact, if I weren't already familiar with Imboden's work, I would be put off by such a description. I would imagine stereotypical pictures of women in water (an age-old association in art) and cliched distortions of the nude figure. But these images are unlike any I have seen, and they have an honest, idiographic quality to them that is hard to find in many of today's photographs. Imboden uses women and men as models, and many of her figures look androgynous. But the gender is secondary. These are images of flesh and they are about mortality. Also, this work is no flash in the mirror for Imboden; she's been working with this subject matter for over a decade.

The book begins with two eloquent essays, one by A.D. Coleman, whose writings I always look forward to reading, and the other by Arthur Ollman. Both writers use the word "horrific" in their essays when referring to Imboden's work. This prompted me to go to my bookshelves and look up Georges Bataille's words about Beauty: "There is always the transition from compression to explosion. The forms may alter but the violence is constant, at once horrifying and fascinating."* Indeed, Imboden portrays bodies and parts of bodies floating in blackness--fleshy, liquescent forms merged, elongated, replicated, or sliced in two by water's surface. They evoke the dark waters of the womb and as well as all creatures' ultimate liquefaction. Once into the images, I became immersed in the book, as one would in water, caught up, swept along, transfixed. The phone rang, and I found it hard to come back to my daily life, even to speak. That interruption made me realize how dangerously alluring these images are.

Though I am not sure it is necessary for photographers to explain their images, I found Imboden's explanations at the end of the book, accompanied by thumbnail images, illuminating. And it is perhaps unfortunate, but a sign of the times, that A.D. Coleman felt obliged to inform us that all of the images are "straight." I, for one, am glad to know. Had I known, or even suspected, that the photographs were digitally altered, I'd have experienced them very differently.

The book, with black cover and jacket, is simply and cleanly designed. The sixty eight reproductions are high resolution spot-varnished duotones on a heavy, dull-coated paper. The presentation is so well-done that when I came across a couple of typos, I felt disappointed. Such a lavish production warrants vigilant proofreading. The book's sections are prefaced by the words of wise men. Altogether there are seven wise men's words in this book, including the essays. Their words are profound and relevant, but I couldn't help wondering: where are the wise, articulate women?

This book needs time to be experienced; it's not a thumb-through book. One needs to slow one's pace, read the text and follow the chronology of the images. And turn the phone off.

* EROTISM----DEATH AND SENSUALITY by Georges Bataille (City Lights, 1986, trans. by Mary Dalwood)