

arts

PORTRAITS

Unknown Pleasures

In a show of recent photographs, artist Leigh Ledare moves beyond his mother

BY ZOË LESCAZE

If you know one body of work by the photographer Leigh Ledare, it's probably "Pretend You're Actually Alive," and if this name does ring a bell, it's the ominous type that rang at Oedipus' wedding. For the series, Mr. Ledare photographed his mother modeling nude, masturbating and making time with younger men. Let's just get this out of the way: Mr. Ledare's upcoming show at Mitchell-Innes & Nash, his first at the Chelsea gallery, will not feature these photographs. Rather, the exhibition will introduce New York audiences to other works Mr. Ledare has been showing across Europe and on the West Coast. They too delve deeply into gender roles, eroticism and the loaded icon of the female muse, but they lend themselves less to shock and scandal than they do to meditation on the medium and the fraught *mise en abyme* of interactions—and transactions—between men and women. Rather than use his participants as props, as some photographers do, Mr. Ledare's work is inherently about human relationships.

"His medium is just as much people as it is pictures," said artist and academic John Miller, who taught Mr. Ledare when he was an M.F.A. candidate at Columbia University. "I think that sets him apart, because I don't think anyone's really working in quite the same way."

Double Bind, one project in the show opening next week, consists mainly of photographs of Mr. Ledare's ex-wife, Meghan. Some were taken by him, others by her second husband, Adam. "In my images, because they're being conveyed to Adam, she's projecting herself toward me in a way that's very guarded," said Mr. Ledare in his Brooklyn studio, staring down at a photograph of Meghan sitting on a bed. "There's an unveiling and veiling. It's this complicated question of where the intimacy lies in that. ... We all know we're making [an artwork], but at the same time, it is intertwined with the reality."

The 2010 project evolved five years after Mr. Ledare and Meghan divorced. He



Detail of *Double Bind* (2010), by Leigh Ledare, with gelatin silver prints and assorted printed materials.

'His medium is just as much people as it is pictures. I don't think anyone's really working in quite the same way.'

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND MITCHELL-INNES & NASH, NY



Installation view of works from Leigh Ledare's *Double Bind* (2010) series at the Box in Los Angeles in 2012.

proposed she accompany him to an isolated cabin, where they would sleep in separate beds and he would take her picture. She remarried shortly after agreeing to participate, and so Mr. Ledare invited Adam to make a separate trip to the same cabin and take his own portraits. *Double Bind* consists of every shot the two men snapped, sometimes in combination with collage elements. Adam's pictures are charged with newlywed libido. More than a few feature Meghan, or parts of her, undressed and invitingly posed. "That's an image I wouldn't have taken of her," said Mr. Ledare, leafing past one of his ex on her hands and knees, underwear yanked down.

Mr. Ledare seems to enjoy talking about his work. He liberally sprinkles in theory-speak ("spatializing the photographic act" and "cross-reflexive dimension," were recurring phrases); *Principles of Topological Psychology* was among the many books atop his desk, and elaborate handwritten charts covered his studio walls.

Born and raised in Seattle, Mr. Ledare moved to New York in 1998 and began working for photographer Larry Clark, who had recently directed *Kids* alongside Harmony Korine. Comparisons between Mr. Ledare's grittier work and Mr. Clark's are common, as are references to Nan Goldin.

"He theorizes his own work, and that theorization or formulation becomes part of the work," said Mr. Miller. "And that really distinguishes him from Goldin and Clark. ... It's not just that he has raw emotion and then theorizes it, but there's an interplay between the two that I find dynamic."

In 2008, he exhibited the series with his mother uptown at Andrew Roth gallery. Certain critics approached it pruriently and projected "some kind of incest thing," according to Mr. Ledare, who emphasized that taboos were only flirted with, not breached. "We're both performing in it, we both know—there may be some sort of fantasy dimension that's at play—but we both know our roles, and they're not crossed."

It depends on how one defines "crossed." I reminded Mr. Ledare of some photo booth strips, in which he and his mother are making out. Was that still performance, or did those roles ever become blurred?

"It's played to the odd hits, you know?" he

'IN THAT WORK, MY MOTHER'S PROJECTING ONTO ME A KIND OF INAPPROPRIATE DESIRE.'

said, somewhat cryptically. "That image came about in a weird way, because I was walking down the street with my mother, and I noticed that she was, like, trying to hold my hand in a way that became kind of, um—in a way that became—it just, it was complicated. So it was kind of, 'O.K., what are you projecting here?' So that image became a way of turning that around in some sense."

"In that work, my mother's projecting onto me a kind of inappropriate desire, right?" he continued. "And positing me as an inappropriately desirous subject of hers, which is really meant to, you know, there's all sorts of ways she's using her sexuality. Both to shield herself from the fact that she's aging, to seek affirmation from me and my brother, out of a total sense of play as well, and also as a means of flipping back on my grandfather, and on society at large, the issues around how she should behave and what her propriety should be as a mother and a daughter."

Mitchell-Innes & Nash co-owner Lucy Mitchell-Innes sees Mr. Ledare's interest in "women's issues" as central to the work. It is apparent in *An Invitation*, another series in the new show, comprising seven large panels. Each features a photograph of the same middle-aged woman superimposed on the front page of *The New York Times* and bits of handwritten text by Mr. Ledare.

Like *Double Bind*, *An Invitation* evolved within a tight set of parameters. A few years ago, while he was traveling in Europe, Mr. Ledare met a married couple. "He's a highly prominent figure in politics and media," he said of the husband, who is in his mid-60s. The wife, who is in her early 40s, is "a cultural critic from an extremely wealthy industrialist family." Later, the woman tried to commission Mr. Ledare to take erotic portraits of her. He declined, unless he could use them in his art. This, she said, was "way too potentially damaging," but he came back with a legal contract, and after much wrangling with "one of the most high-power lawyers in New York," Mr. Ledare flew to their house.

Each panel corresponds to a summer day spent with the couple, dated by that morning's paper. Lucian Freud dies. A gunman slays Norwegian teenagers. "There are these different languages that are put into play," said Mr. Ledare, citing the legalese of the contract de-



An Invitation: Friday, July 22, 2011 (2012) by Leigh Ledare.

signed to safeguard the woman's identity (her face is redacted by black boxes), the reportage in the newspaper and his own notes on the project.

Additionally, "there are these different roles that I play and play into," he continued, "both the portraitist, the kind of desiring male, the younger man posed in the middle of this complicated, in some way dysfunctional marriage, the confidante, all these different things."

In a way, Mr. Ledare felt his subject was recasting herself as his mother, retroactively inserting herself into his earlier work. His notes beneath one image read: "Things I don't want: to do mother again. Things she wants: to do mother again." ■

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST, MITCHELL-INNES & NASH, NY/THE BOX, LOS ANGELES

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND MITCHELL-INNES & NASH, NY