

UPON FIRST GLANCE Fleckenstein's images seem to represent a mixture of portraiture and figure studies. Though the figure is in fact dressed there is a sensual quality to the work that is often eclipsed by the nude.

What Are We Looking at?

So how is this sensuality created? The first image is charged with atmosphere and mood, both as a result of the romantic lighting and the expression of the model. Her face is lit like a half-moon; this estranged relative of the earth that sometimes shows herself entirely and often hides completely. The magnetism that the earth exerts on the moon and the moon in turn on our tides and our emotional states charges the image with its own orbiting gravity. And grave it can be for the viewer who gets caught up in it.

The moon may create an atmosphere in a metaphoric sense but has none in a scientific context. Without a protective suit, instant death and the frigid temperature of space in our solar system await. This contradiction can be attractive in and of itself, like the proverbial moth to the flame. The inviting light will inevitably burn you if you come to close. While this is cold moonlight, it still exerts that inevitable pull (Figure 17.1).

This pull is amplified by the ambiguity that emanates from the subject herself. She seems to be lost in contemplation and simultaneously on the threshold of a decision. For the viewer, this can generate a feeling of wrong-footedness, foremost because it seems unclear whether anyone is supposed to be there at all. It also seems wrong to just leave, as the moment is already too personal, trapping the viewer into having to find another clue.

How Can the Image Be Interpreted?

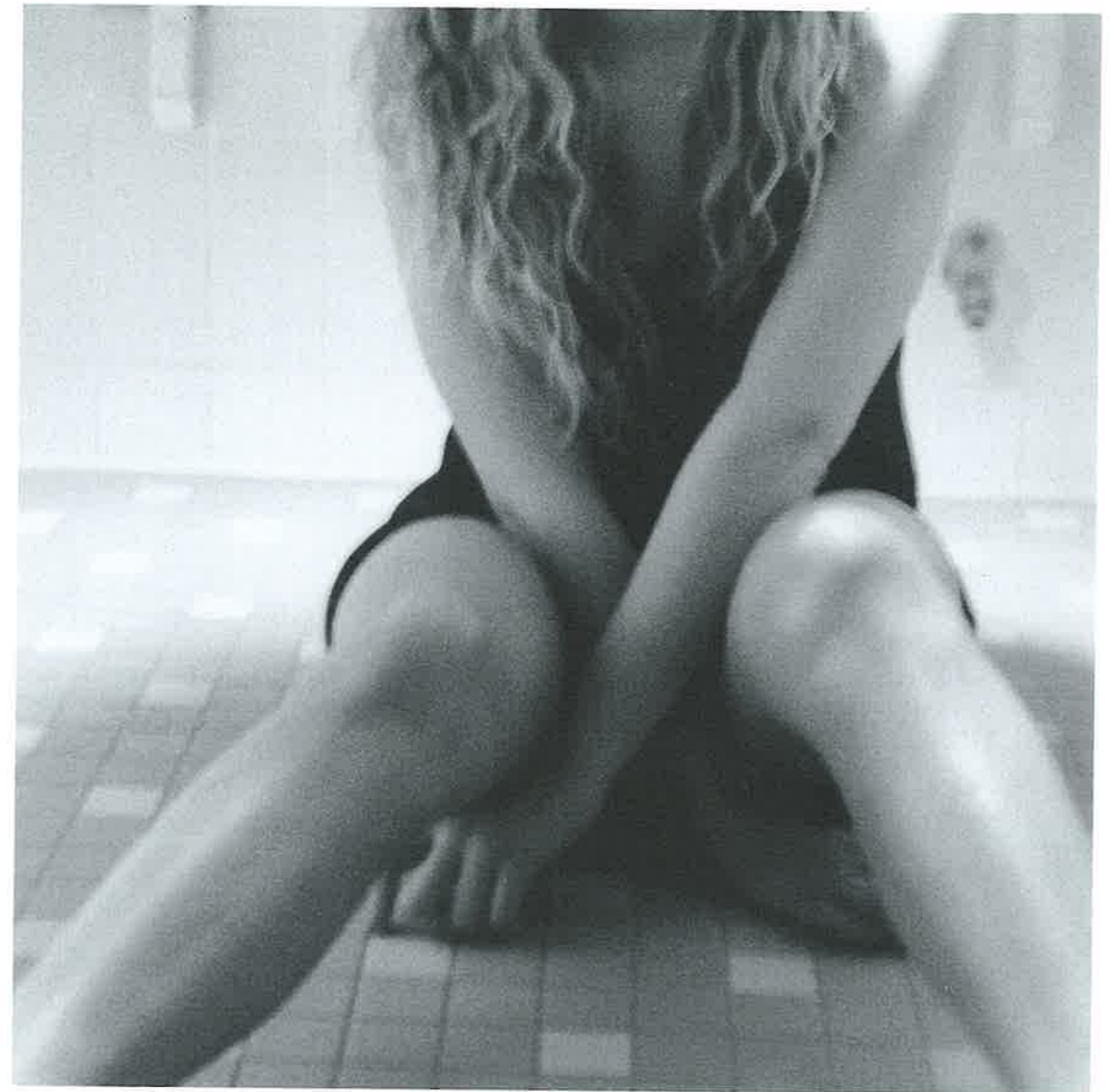
Reading the body language suggests that she is protective of her chest; her right arm already covers her left breast and her hair. It is this protective gesture that draws attention to what is under the dress, which otherwise might not ever have become a consideration for the viewer. Additionally, this is reinforced by the second image (Figure 17.2).

Somehow both the subject and the viewer have fallen down on the floor in what we now recognize to be a bathroom. The viewer is forced to look straight between the model's legs or at her décolleté. The sanctuary of her face is gone and the photographer is pushing the issue more forcefully now. The near symmetrical image directs our eye back to the point of graphic convergence just below the spatial horizon line. The model is sitting in a way that would not be considered to be ladylike but protects her private space with both arms.

Conclusion

Much has been written about the male gaze and increasingly about the female gaze as it asserts itself. Both the provocation and the censorship these images contain read like a testament of defiance while celebrating beauty in a way that is self-contained. The photographer and model seem to neither look for approval nor definition from anything other than themselves. Come on audience, deal with it!

I would be remiss in not stating the obvious: the first image is heavily dominated by the inverted letter **N** formed by the arms and the second image by the letter **X**. **No**, **Never**, **Now** or **X** marks the spot, **X**ing you out and **seX** are some of the immediate connotations.



Assignments You May Want to Challenge Yourself With

- Body language
- Gestural meaning
- Influence of light(ing)
- Alphabetic symbolism

FIGURE 17.2
Untitled.
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Fleckenstein