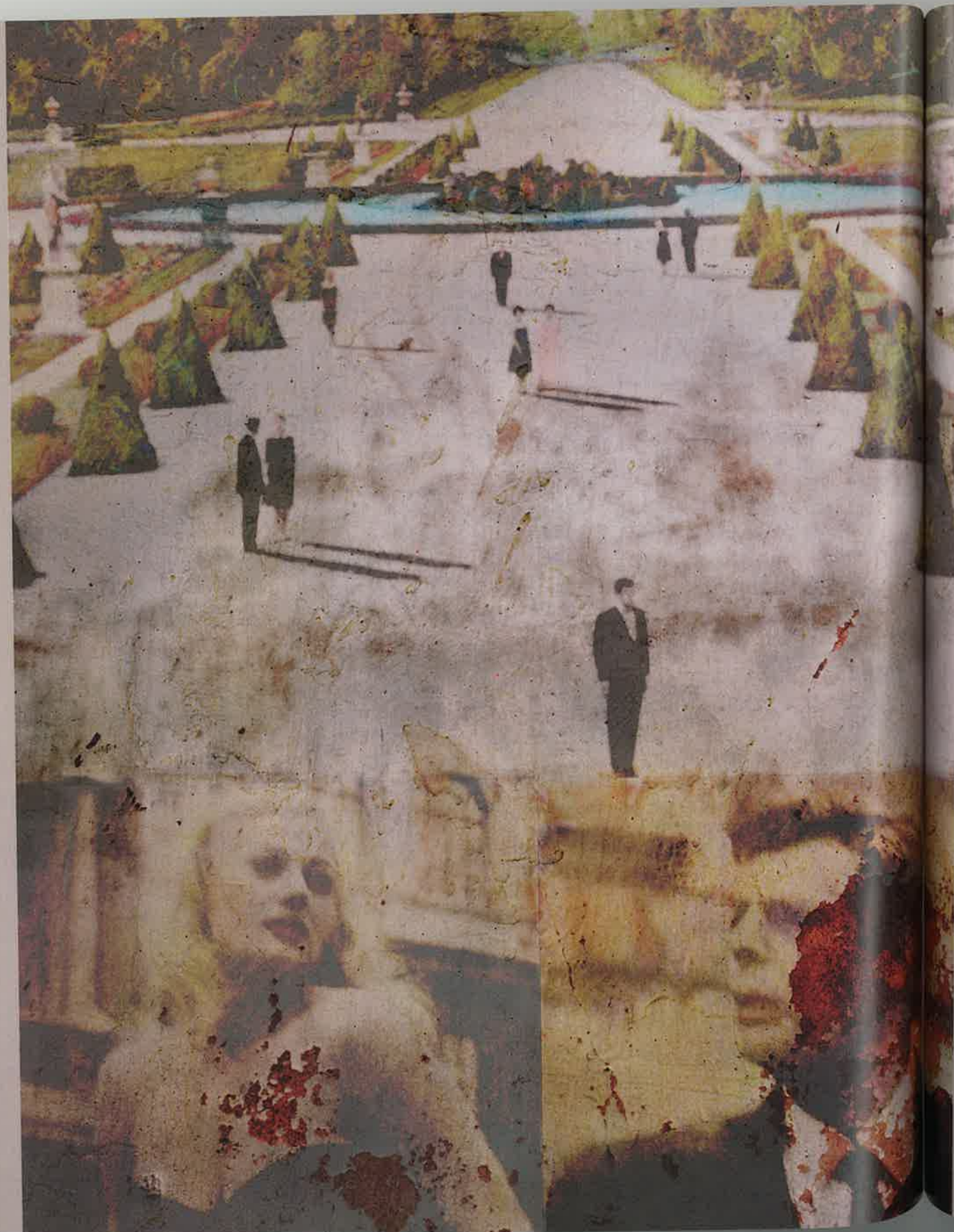




CHAPTER 19

Appropriation
Reinterpretation

Featuring work by Eleanor Rappe

FIGURE 19.1 Untitled. © Eleanor Rappe

RAPPE USES PART OF a relatively contemporary movie poster with images of two movie stars from a generation ago to create new relationships and associations that span time. Image elements include manicured parks that in the past were built and maintained on a large scale (Figure 19.1).

What Are We Looking at?

In total, in her combined appropriations, she represents six women and five men. Three are in pairs, three are alone, and two are together and shown close-up. Let's say the three pairs are couples. Two are male and female, one is female and female, and three are single. In that case the men would outnumber women two to one, which in terms of world population would be quite wrong. Overall there are slightly more men on the planet, arguably a statistical heat. The pairs to which I assigned couple status might all be brothers and sisters and sisters.

Why should any of this matter? Quite honestly, I don't think that it does. And yet, how many couples have passed all of us by when we were alone. Their connection, whether intimate, familial, or just friends can reinforce the sense of loneliness we can all feel, even if all the singles are in a relationship and none of the couples are.

That is an intersection where cultural norms and nature are set on a collision course. That is where the safe harbor of

years of reliable trust, love, and deep loyalty may be devastated by a cyclone, turning even the safest harbor into another littered beach.

There seems to be increasing consensus and scientific evidence that most creatures, including humans, are by nature polygamous and some socially monogamous, in particular when it is to the benefit of their offspring. There also seems to be broad consensus that humans don't like change. Humans prefer certainty to uncertainty, predictability over unpredictability. Why? It provides the comfort of the familiar, assuredness, and anticipatable outcomes.

What is wrong with that? Arguably, nothing. It's reassuring to know where we are from, where we are going, and where we belong. By extension it makes equal sense to be reassured to whom we belong, who belongs to us, and, above all else, that we belong. In other words, we are not alone, unknown, and inconsequential. Yet, there can be this yearning, this desire for more, for something else, for a surprise that might change the established path to the grave.

It is this contradiction in human needs and wants that Rappe appears to engage.

When we are separated from what we know and where we belong we can feel homesick. In German this feeling is expressed as *Heimweh* (home-sickness).

Unlike in English though, the German language also has a word for the opposite longing, *Fernweh* (far-sickness), the yearning to be elsewhere, the desire for something different, something new.

How Can the Image Be Interpreted?

In Rappe's image the austerity of the gardens, the formality of the closing, the utterly tamed and artificially shaped trees are set against a wilder, bigger background of mature trees and groundcover that appears to have been left in place and peace to grow at will. If people are there, we can't see them because the canopy of the trees provides both shade and privacy. This is the original home which frightens us, and for good reason. Predators and the uncontrolled fecundity of nature itself can still be threats.

Desire versus the comfort of the familiar, no matter how uncomfortable it may be; longing, even lust, versus the predictability of where we will wake up. The fear of losing ourselves, absent the framework of the expected; yearning to be unmoored and to drift on the basis of chance and spontaneity as opposed to following a set compass with a known weather forecast; openness and vulnerability against our public façade and our social identity. I am sure you can expand on the contradictions and seemingly incompatible urges that both simmer and rage in every heart that seeks more than being a four-cylinder blood pump.

So much is denied us. We deny ourselves so much. And, in return, so much is given and granted. Yet, the compromise each of us strikes when torn between impulse and security, adventure and responsibility attracts us to escape monotony, routines, and the unfathomable boredom of mediocrity.

From books to movies, music to art, we experience and (re)create that which once filled our own hearts with trepidation, tears flowing uncontrollably, because we are simply moved, and tense with the thrill of anticipation.

In the visual field, movies and TV offer a vast counterbalance to our everyday existence. Both present characters we identify with, usually larger than life and better looking than most of us.

Rappe appears to reference that as well. She shows us movie stars, Anita Ekberg and Marcello Mastroianni, the sex symbols in Fellini's *La Dolce Vita* of the 1960s: a moment in time, when established social values started to be thrown out of the window. Unprecedented experimentation and freedom, in part also due to readily available birth control pills for women, lasted until HIV/AIDS put a horrific end to the carefree promiscuity and redefinition of social norms across the social spectrum, starting with the gay male community. The illness was touted as anything from a government conspiracy to divine retribution from God. In the early days the virus was not well understood and prejudice, ignorance, and fear reigned

supreme. Traditional family values were reasserted and there was condemnation of those who weren't brought to heel.

But it was too late. Too late for the many who had to die before serious investment in combating and eventually managing HIV infection occurred. Too late to push the large and increasingly out gay communities back into their assigned closets. Too late to deny women self-determination over their reproductive organs and the definition of their own sexuality. Too late to convince people that pot was more dangerous than alcohol or cigarettes. Too late to repatriate everyone back to the 1950s. Simply too late, in every conceivable way. The cat was out of the bag and while it was being chased around, a taste of *The Sweet Life*, *La Dolce Vita*, lingered until the inequality and recognition of double standards in terms of whom and how we love brought gay rights and women's rights to the forefront of social justice and civil rights.

When I look at Ekberg and Mastroianni as the literal cornerstones of Rappe's image, bloodied and blistering, as they appear to be, I see a reminder of this nefarious illness and the attempt to symbolically assassinate the icons of that age—to remove their likeness from a movie poster, if necessary with a blowtorch.

What Rappe is reminding us of, is that while we may be on our way, we are far from reaching a truly "equality-based" society. Opposition to gay and women's rights is only part of a far deeper and

polarizing division that is blowing misogyny, xenophobia, and homophobia into the public discourse on a daily basis with an increasingly ramped-up rhetoric, promoting hate rather than love. Since this crevasse appears to fracture across the world, irrespective of borders, we might argue that climate change is upon us not just in terms of, well, climate change, but also in terms of change in the climate of how humanity will end up defining itself.

Conclusion

I interpret Rappe's austere landscape, the vast expanse of decorative rocks, as the life we might face when the dress code for everyone will be corporate or funereal again, the similarities of which are notable. The hushed conversations, the generic façades behind which we may yet again bury our diversity, plurality, and courage, may well be Rappe's warning of our collective funeral as we try to force what won't be forced, as we won't let go of all that which we must.

Rappe's image may entirely consist of appropriation but her narrative is all her own and all of ours. Let's be mindful then of how we tend our gardens in our minds, hearts, homes, and towns and of what belongs to nature itself. Sometimes stepping back can be a great step forward. This, I think, is Rappe's lament and her gift to us, her viewers.

She takes this lament a step further in her image in what I think of as an homage to elephants.



FIGURE 19.2
Untitled. © Eleanor Rappe

For various reasons, the ivory trade, the loss of habitat, the decimation of their culture, which includes sophisticated rituals and even burial grounds, this image speaks in a way that makes further elaboration unnecessary. I think of it as the funeral of all the elephants, these highly intelligent and sensitive creatures that we have driven to the brink of extinction, like so much else. As useful as it may be to analyze images, sometimes it is equally important to let an image be. To let it do its job.

This is an example of such an image for me, and grief is among the most personal experiences of all (Figure 19.2).

When did they start having enemies?

Assignments You May Want to Challenge Yourself With

- Newspaper appropriation
- Hand coloring
- Patina
- Social norms
- Too late
- Collage