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· BORDERLINE ·

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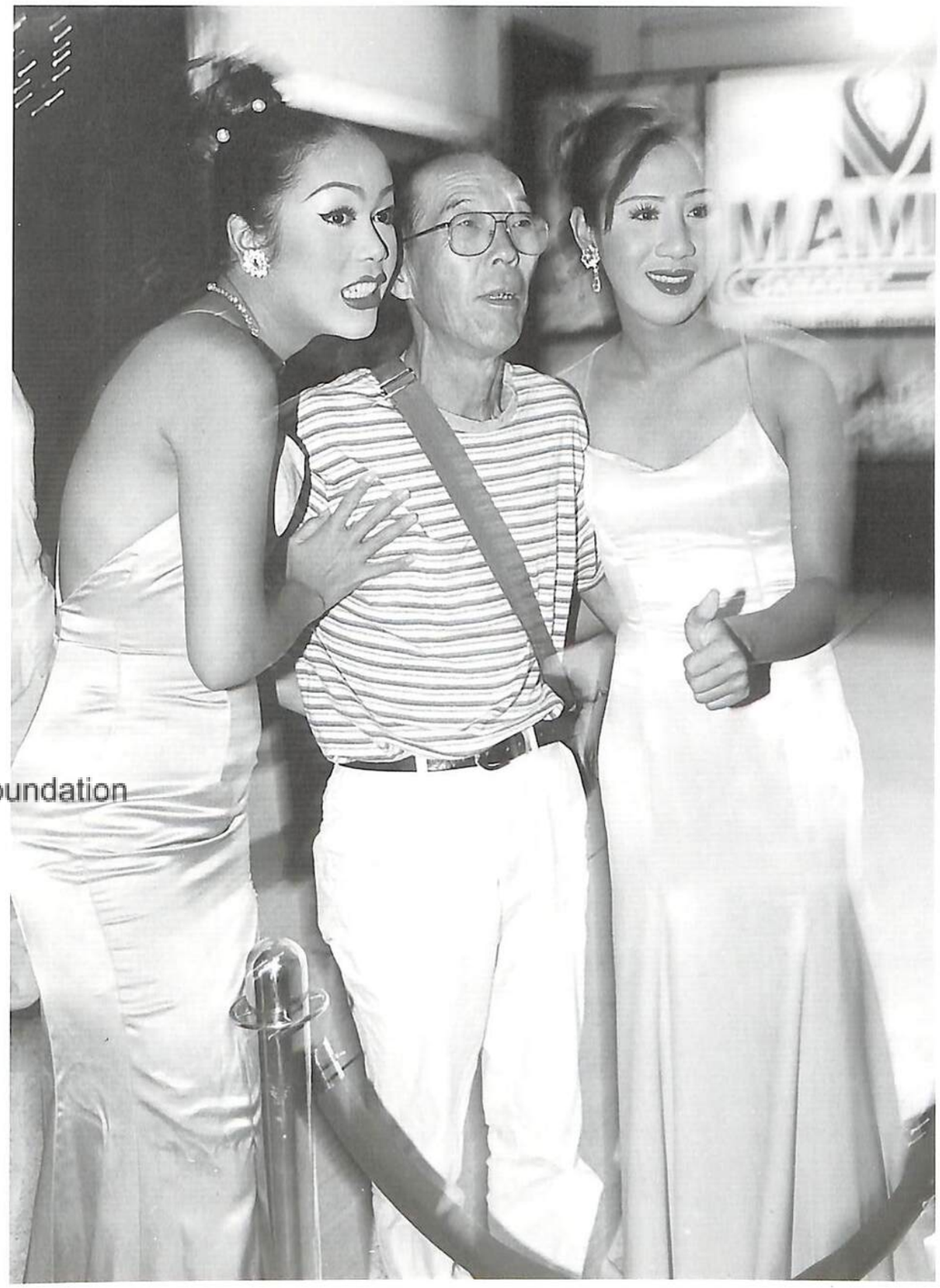
Front cover: Pierre et Gilles, *Les Mariés*, 1992, color print, 73 x 54 cm., collection of Maison Européenne de la Photographie, Paris

Opposite: Manit Sriwanichpoom, *Exotica 6 (detail)*, 2001, color print, 60 x 41 cm., collection of the artist

Back cover: Michael Shaowanasai, *Portrait of the Artist*, 2001, color print, collection of the artist



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Month of Photography in Bangkok

Curated by Apinan Poshyananda

The Art Center, Center of Academic Resources, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok

1-28 December 2001, Mon-Fri 8:00-19:00, Sat 9:00-1600, closed Sundays

Maison Européenne de la Photographie, Paris, Alliance Française with support from AFAA and the French Embassy, Bangkok

Blurred Boundaries

We live in an age of information technology, media hype and propaganda war. Increasingly, the old sayings of "seeing is believing" or "hearing from ten mouths is incomparable to seeing with our own eyes" (*sib pak wa mai thao ta haen*) seem to be no longer applicable in the real world we live in. What we see is not necessarily reality. But what exactly is reality these days?

The World Trade Center, New York, 11 September 2001

In *Artificial Intelligence*, Steven Spielberg gives a chilling warning of indistinct separation between reality and fiction, robot and human, computer chips and emotion. What might be incredibly advanced or morally incorrect in practice of science and technology at one time could be common and widely accepted over a short period. Reality has gained a new meaning through the power of telecommunications and global media networks. Viewers have been accustomed to news coverage of religious and ethnic wars, airplane hijacks, terrorist attacks or suicide bombings in Tanzania, Kenya, Afghanistan, Sudan and Yemen. On 11 September the shocking reality of global terrorism at the World Trade Center, New York, and the Pentagon, Washington D.C. witnessed by used by mass media. Over and over again the shots of United Airlines flight 175 full of fuel and passengers crashing into the second WTC tower while the first skyscraper hit was already in smoke became ingrained in our mind's eye and psyche. The sight of victims jumping from skyscrapers as both WTC towers, the symbol of American capitalism, collapsed challenged our visual perception. Could this be real? The atrocities at Ground Zero where thousands were burnt and buried alive made us realize that this was no illusion. The aftermath of horrific scenes took sometime to sink in making us accept that they were not fictitious scenes from Hollywood action movies.

Photography remains one of the most potent media to capture reality, emotions and events. Arguably, at times the camera could play tricks to the eye especially today when digital effects and photomontages are extremely convincing. In the hands of the photographers the scenes or portraits could be recorded, manipulated or conjured to serve particular end results. For instance, through media coverage in the West, President George W. Bush and Prime Minister Tony Blair are portrayed as symbols of good and civilized fighting against terrorism and fanaticism. Osama Bin Laden and Saddam Hussein are seen as evil and rogues whose hatred toward Western values attempt to bring destruction and mayhem to mankind. In contrast, photos, posters and T-shirts of these Islamic leaders are perceived by the masses in the Islamic world as heroes or Muslim Che Guevaras who resist and subvert decadence and poisonous capitalism from the West. In propaganda war, reality and facts can be distorted and blurred to the limit that there is no longer clear distinction between black or white, right or wrong, terrorism or pacification. Like it or not, we must accept that we live precariously between gray areas and murky borderlines.

Cataclysm at the WTC and Pentagon was followed by America's fight against terror by bombing in Afghanistan that ignited possibility of religious conflicts, biochemical warfare and global terrorism. With shock waves that sent ripples throughout the world the timing is appropriate to look at some borderline issues through contemporary photography that seem increasingly relevant in our daily life of confusion, chaos and blurred boundaries.

In preparation for the Month of Photography in Bangkok I was invited by AFAA, the French Embassy and the Alliance Francaise to visit Maison Européene de la Photographie (MEP), Paris in March 2001. I had the fortunate experience to study the enormous collection of one of the world's leading museums of photography. Studio visits and interviews with artists Orlan and Martial Cherrier were conducted.

On invitation of Jean-Luc Monterosso, the director of MEP, I had the chance to select works from the museum collection for the exhibition "Borderline" to be exhibited at the Art Center, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok in December 2001. Spending many hours in the storage rooms at the museum with Jean-Luc Monterosso and Pascal Hoel was a learning experience as hundreds of photographs were studied and scrutinized.

My selection was based on the concept of the marginal and ambiguity, something not clearly fixed and subject to debate. I searched for images reflecting something not quite meeting or conforming to accepted patterns. Borderline seems to be part of the fabrics of our social world of cultural and racial diversity. Increasingly, we live in the world of dislocation, disillusion and debauchery. For this exhibition, I touch on the ambiguities of the naked, the dressed, transsexuality, homosexuality, deformity, cross- dressing and gender mixing. We seem to need such abnormality to reassure us that we live in normalcy so that the out of bounds will never be crossed.

Social taboos in some societies suppress or ignore these borderline issues causing these people to be seen as freaks and outcasts. In Buddhist societies like Bangkok where tolerance for sexual preference is known to be widely accepted critical judgement on images related to sexuality and sexual practice is somewhat inconsistent and lenient. Demand and supply for news on sex crime, disasters, murder and abnormality in mass media have made the public addictive to sensational news and scandals. Censorship committee of Thailand tends to censor indiscriminately on the basis that the general public lack intelligence and education. Front-page headlines on Thai tabloids frequently contain juxtapositions of semi naked girls, horrific accidents, sex scandals, teenagers at Ecstasy parties, monks caught in mischievous acts, victims of terrorism and murder cases. Yet, on television viewers see ridiculous censor spots that blur images of someone smoking a cigarette. While the next scene it is allowed that this same person has his head blown off splattering blood all over the place. Our appetite for sex and violence is aroused by daily doses from mass media from morning till night. Exciting stimulation allows people to be startled, thrilled, shocked and frightened. Furthermore, they are curious and fascinated by ugliness and deformity that become ambiguous desires exploited by the mass media.

By addressing the problems mentioned above the artworks in this exhibition help us understand the potential of photography as means of conveying message in the age of chaos, censorship and propaganda. It has been observed that the shocks of avant-garde art enable fears and repressed emotions to be released in context removed from reality. By confronting sensitive subjects represented in the art world viewers may endure exposure to the tensions and problems of the real world.

Two self-portraits by the late American artist Robert Mapplethorpe epitomize this exhibition's theme of ambiguity and borderline. Mapplethorpe is seen as neither man nor woman. Angel or devil? He stares defiantly like a narcissist. In *Ken* (1987) from the notorious *Black Males* portfolio, Mapplethorpe reduces the male body to the condition of an object of desire. Like a classical statue seen from the back the beautiful black male is sensuous and seductive. In contrast, *Lisa Lyon* (1982) poses like a white beauty queen displaying her nudity and flexed muscles. *Louise Bourgeois* (1982) smiles sweetly at the camera as she holds an enormous phallus. After his death in 1989, Mapplethorpe's exhibitions became the focal point of censorship controversy and prosecution for obscenity.

Through his self-portraits Michel Journiac attempted to cross the borders of desire as he developed interplay of roles and sexes. In *24 Hours in the Life of a Woman* (1974), Journiac is dressed as a middle-class French woman carrying out her daily chores. Journiac analyzes dress and clothing as social trap in gender play and experience of transvestism. Photomontages by Pierre Molinier depict parts of doubly-gendered body with fetish items. Legs, black silk stockings, high-heeled shoes and black lace are objects of fetishism that Molinier assembled as symbols of androgenous hermaphrodite. Molinier's infatuation with incest and cross-dressing was a result from fixation on his sister Julienne and discussion with female friends such as Emmanuelle Arsan, the author of *Emmanuelle* who spent time during the 1960s in Bangkok.

Yasumasa Morimura is a world-famous photographer who is notorious for his cross-dressing acts. *No Pain, No Gain* (1993) is a rare piece of work that shows Morimura as male. Playing with the idea of appropriation and reinterpretation of history, he recreates montages of the infamous press photo of the execution of the Vietcong soldier in the Vietnam War. Morimura appears as executioner, victim, soldier and passerby as the scene takes place outside Daimauru Department Store.

Pierre et Gilles are renowned for the humor and parody in their work that manipulate mass market imagery. They make subversive comments on contemporary culture through extravagant and glamorous presentations of themselves and their male models. In *Les Mariés* (1992), the French couple pose and gaze with delight for their wedding photograph. Space of fantasy and reality is mixed as the spectator is unsure if these two lovers are posing for their wedding or making remark on equal rights for same-sex couples. Humor and satire are evident in works by the Argentine photographer Jorge Damonte whose series of portraits of his brother Copi are inspired by working closely in theatre production. Hilarious depiction of men in drag seems acceptable and appreciated when they are placed within of space of play and fiction.

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Claude Alexandre explores sexual fantasy, discipline and control in her photographs. Glimpses of faces and anatomy undergoing pleasure and pain are the trademarks of Alexandre. The ambiguous drama behind these works is put across the viewer who in turn becomes part of the voyeuristic game. Michael Shaowanasai is one of the few Thai artists who have explored seriously issues of homosexuality and transvestism. Despite openness to discuss and practice there seems to be little space in Thai art world to represent these subjects. Shaowanasai's video series of *Iron Pussy* bring to surface the gaiety and sorrow of homosexual life in Thai sex supermarkets. His self-portrait photographs explore the ego and maternal infatuation where there is little room for virility and manhood. Like so many, Shaowanasai is trapped in no man's land where yearning for acceptance in society is never fulfilled. Images of bondage and confinement in saffron robe draw analogies on unmentional subjects in highly referred institutions.

In her series *Modern Lovers* (1989), Bettina Rheims presents young and beautiful models whose gaze and posture appear on fashion magazines and posters. Slick and carefree their unisex outfit and hairstyle indicate youthful beauty and reverse gender roles. Photographer and video artist Martial Cherrier, the former French champion body builder scrutinizes his own body and mind going through stages of transformation to reach the ultimate goal in French male beauty contest. Cherrier records his self-portraits as he pumps his body with excessive food and drugs at the risk of damaging his physical and mental health. Arthur Tress compares idealized classical beauty with contemporary nude who is seen as hermaphrodite. Sexless, his/her gender is interchangeable as he/she displays nakedness among the gods. In *John Birch, London* (1990), Stephan Richter displays naked beauty through tattooed skin as the English gentleman poses with his favorite sports. In contrast, the Czech photographer Jan Saudek consciously conceals and camouflages gender and sex of his models by clothing. In the hand-painted diptych photographs, *Wedding, 15 March 1891, 15/03/01*, the persons who appear in the wedding photograph are in fact all females.

Manit Sriwanichpoom, *Exotica 2 (detail)*, 2001, gelatin silver print, collection of the artist

Manit Sriwanichpoom is a well-known photographer whose critical works reflect Thai life saturated with double standard, contradiction and derision. More than ever there seem to be areas of pink in Thai society. For "Borderline," Sriwanichpoom wanted to make photo research on student prostitution that has been a big hit among youths during the time of economic slump. Another idea was to document the infamous Thai transvestite boxer Nong Toom. In the end he chose to record the hazy borderline in Patpong nightlife where the appetite for strange and grotesque entertainment produces fantasy and paradise for nocturnal consumers.

Photography is the medium that can record slices of reality. Nan Goldin is commonly known as photographer of marginality. Often her works are almost too real as she chooses to present the other side of the trouble-free society of the American Dream. Her works reflect her life and faces of marked by physical violence, drug abuse, disease and alcohol. Her self-portrait after being battered is an example of the American Nightmare. In contrast, the models in the photographs by New Orleans based George Dureau reveal no signs of pain and remorse. Instead, the sitters who are "normal" street people who happen to be disabled or deformed stare out proudly with dignity. Through the lens of Dureau these models are no freaks but normal human beings whose body is beautiful and sensuous.

Dansoung Sungvornveshapan, *Pre-Sacrifice*, 1997, silver print, collection of the artist

Similarly, portraits by 25/34 Photographes (Ralf Marsault and Heino Muller) capture glimpses of real life as they record members of street gangs and youth culture. Tension and pain can be detected in self-portraits by David Nebreda whose works seem to invite the spectator to share his acts of masochism. Posing like Chirst or martyr, Nebreda proudly exhibits the lacerated marks on his emaciated torso. Dansuong Sungvornveshapan presents in his series *The Last of Homo Sapiens* wrapped and naked bodies. He anticipates the foreseeable future after environmental destruction or biochemical warfare as people walk around naked with gas masks or wrapped up and hidden in cocoon. With recent atrocities in New York and fear of biochemical terror his photographs seem to prepare for the events to come in near future.

Joel-Peter Witkin is infamous for his tableaux vivants with disabled and dismembered bodies that stun and shock viewers with fascination and repugnance. Witkin has gone beyond the lure of sex and violence on mass media or appeal of some fairground freak shows. For Witkin, there is no borderline except extremity. The models in his studio are beautiful in a strange way. *Helena Fourment, San Francisco* (1984) and *Las Maninas, New Mexico* (1987) are compositions inspired by famous oil portrait paintings by Peter Paul Rubens and Diego Velazquez, respectively. In *Woman on the Table* (1987), *Melvin Burkhardt: Human Oddity* (1985) and *The Bird of Quevada* (1982) are potent images that are both bizarre and erotically appealing.

Niwat Kongpien crtiques contemporary Thai society through his photomontages in the series *Kharb loog kharb dorg* (2001). Erotic temple scenes from Phrathinang Phutthaisawn, Wat Khongkharam and Wat Suthat are juxtaposed with photographs of contemporary Thai nudes. Niwat reminds us of amorous and voyeuristic acts in the past and how they are sensuously displayed in sacred places. In various times, the line of taboo is never clealy marked.

Andres Serrano has been praised and criticized for his sacrilegious images such as *Pissed Christ* (1987) that offended Christian and non-Christian believers. For the exhibition "Borderline," I have chosen *The Church, Sister Jeanne Myriam* (1991) not because it is controversial but for its contemplative quality. The clasped hands of the nun in white cape are symbolic of devotion, faith and ecstasy.

If the saying of "seeing is believing" is no longer applicable in this age of gray areas and vagueness are we left to wonder what lies behind the sacred garment/skirt of the Church?

Apinan Poshyananda*

*Assoc, Prof. Dr Apinan Poshyananda is Head of the Art Center, Center of Academic Resources, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok. Currently, He is guest curator of the exhibition "Beyond Paradise: Nordic Artists Travel East" organized by Moderna Museet, Stockholm, travelling to Bangkok, Kuala Lumpur, Ho Chi Minh and Shanghai in 2002-3 <www.car.chula.ac.th/paradise>. He is guest curator and adjudicator for exhibition of Visual Art EV+A 2002, Limerick, Ireland. He is also guest curator for the art exhibition by Montien Boonma to travel to New York, San Francisco and Paris in 2003. In March 2000, Poshyananda received the Rockefeller Research Residency program in Bellagio, Italy. In September 2001, he was awarded the Outstanding National Researcher Award by the National Research Council of Thailand.

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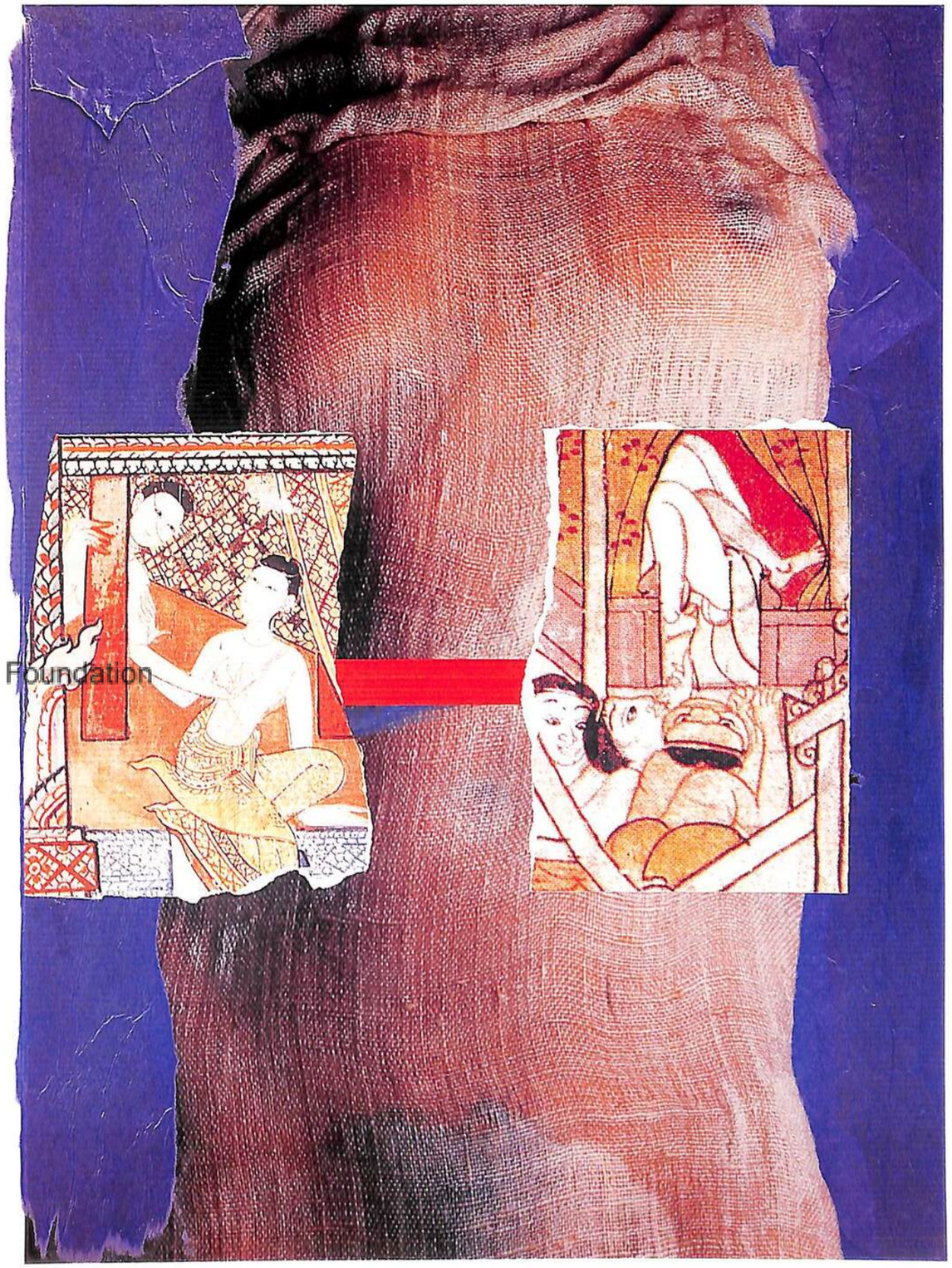

Niwat Kongpien, *Kharb loog kharb dorg 3* , 2001, color print, collection of the artist

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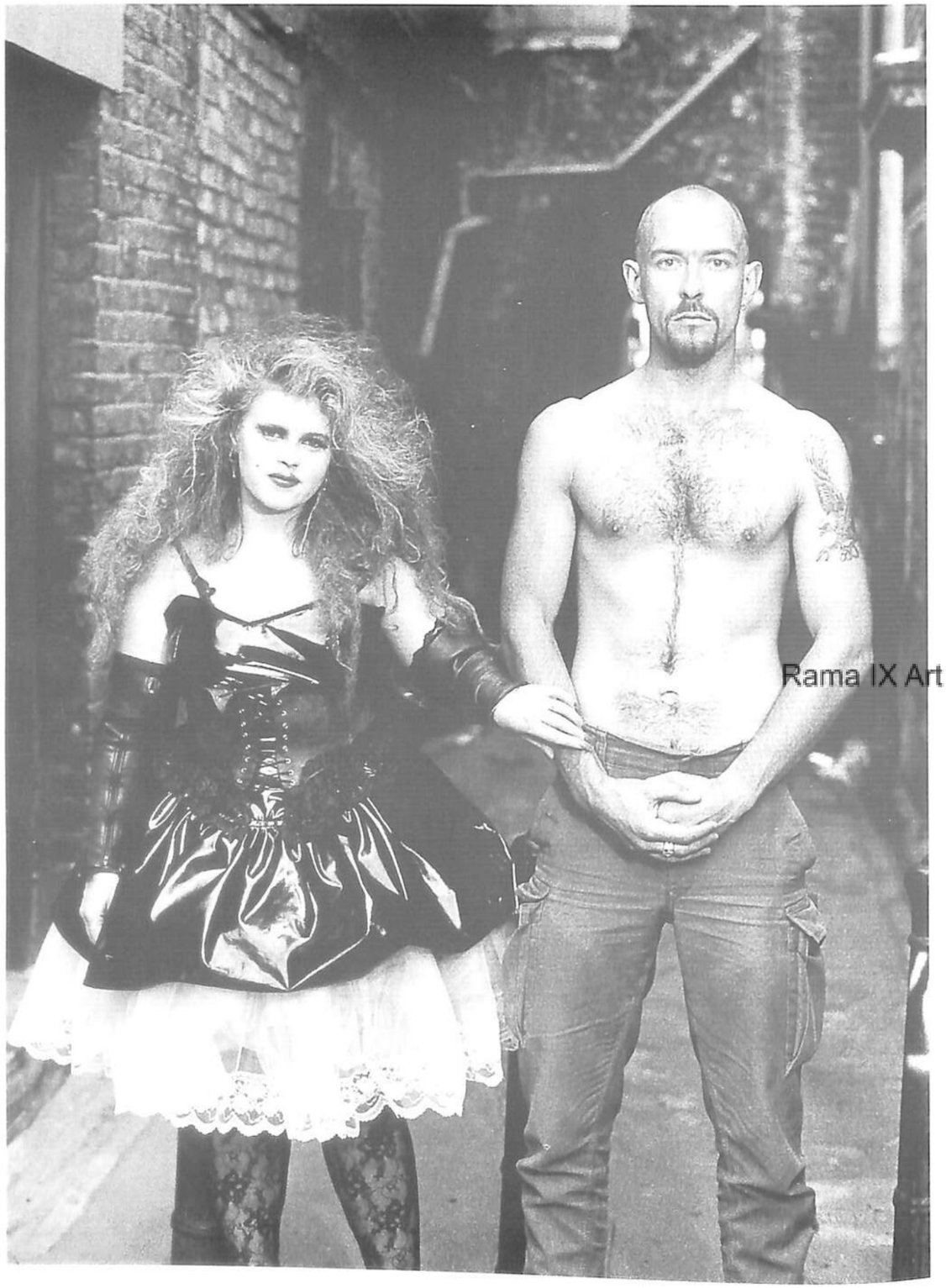
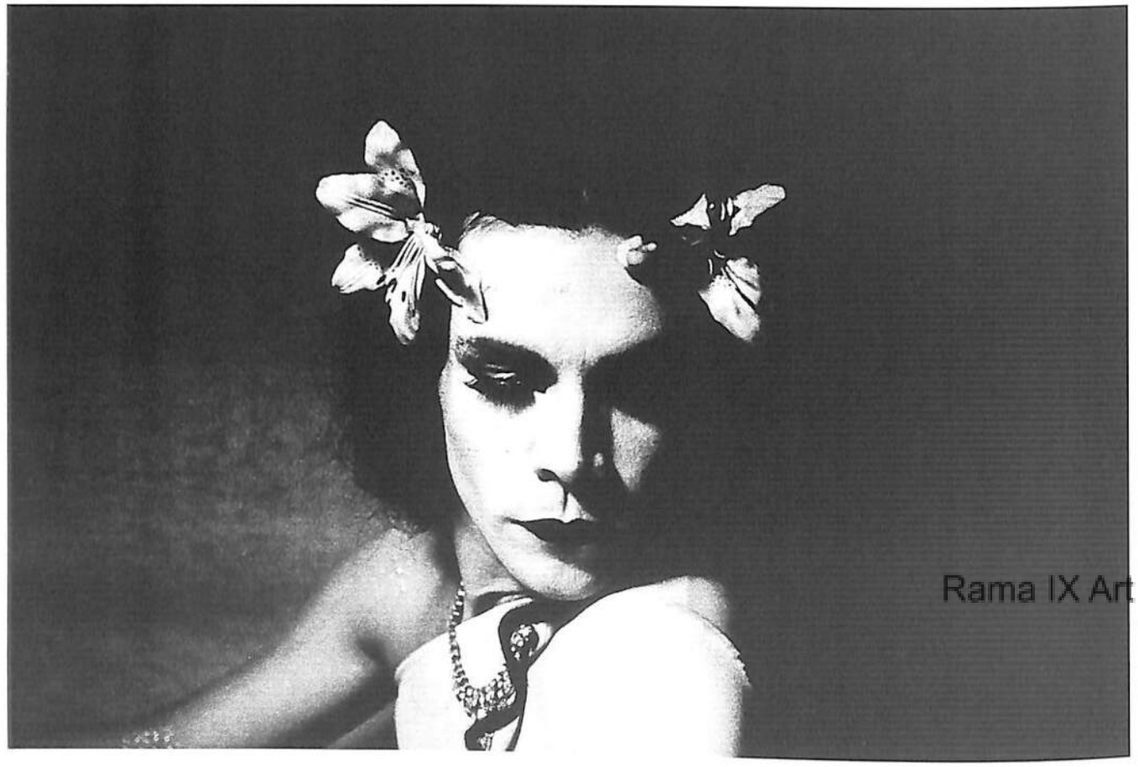


25/34 Photographes, *Cindy, Hugh*, London, 1989, gelatin silver print, 40.5 x 30.4 cm.
Collection of Maison Européenne de la Photographie, Paris

25/34 Photographes, *Sue, Debbie, Berlin*, 1993, gelatin silver print, 40.5 x 30.4 cm.
Collection of Maison Européenne de la Photographie, Paris



Claude Alexandre, *Untitled*, 1979, gelatin silver print, 50 x 60 cm.
Collection of Maison Européenne de la Photographie, Paris

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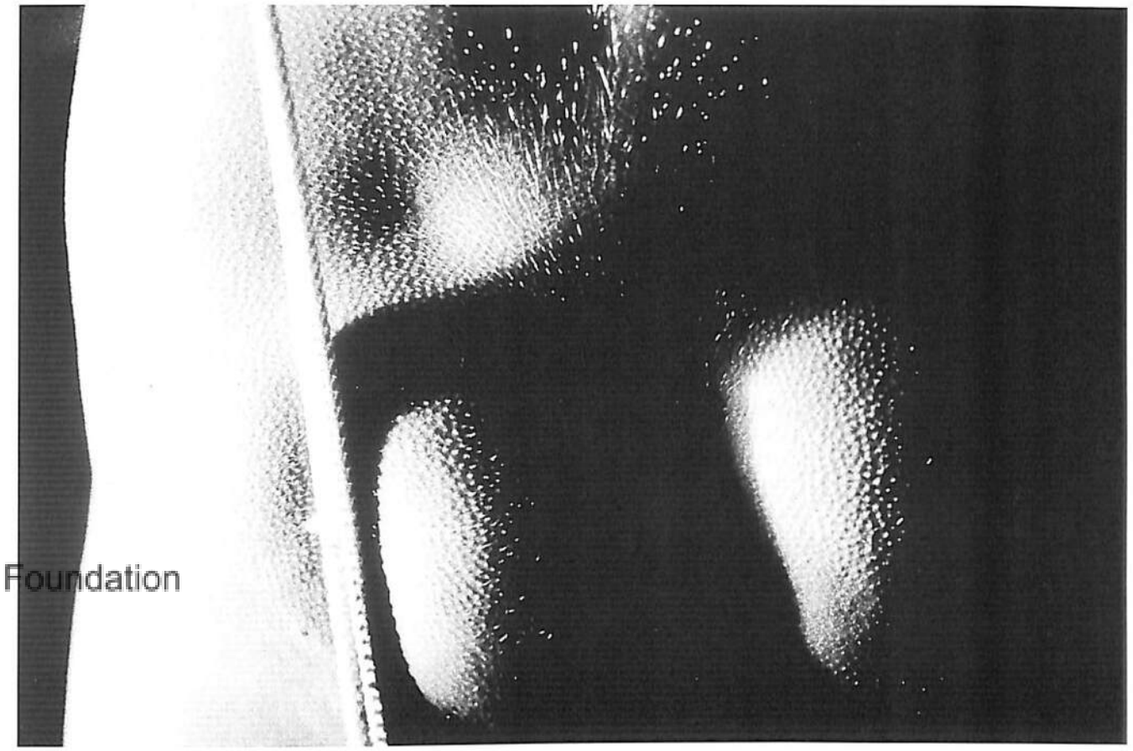
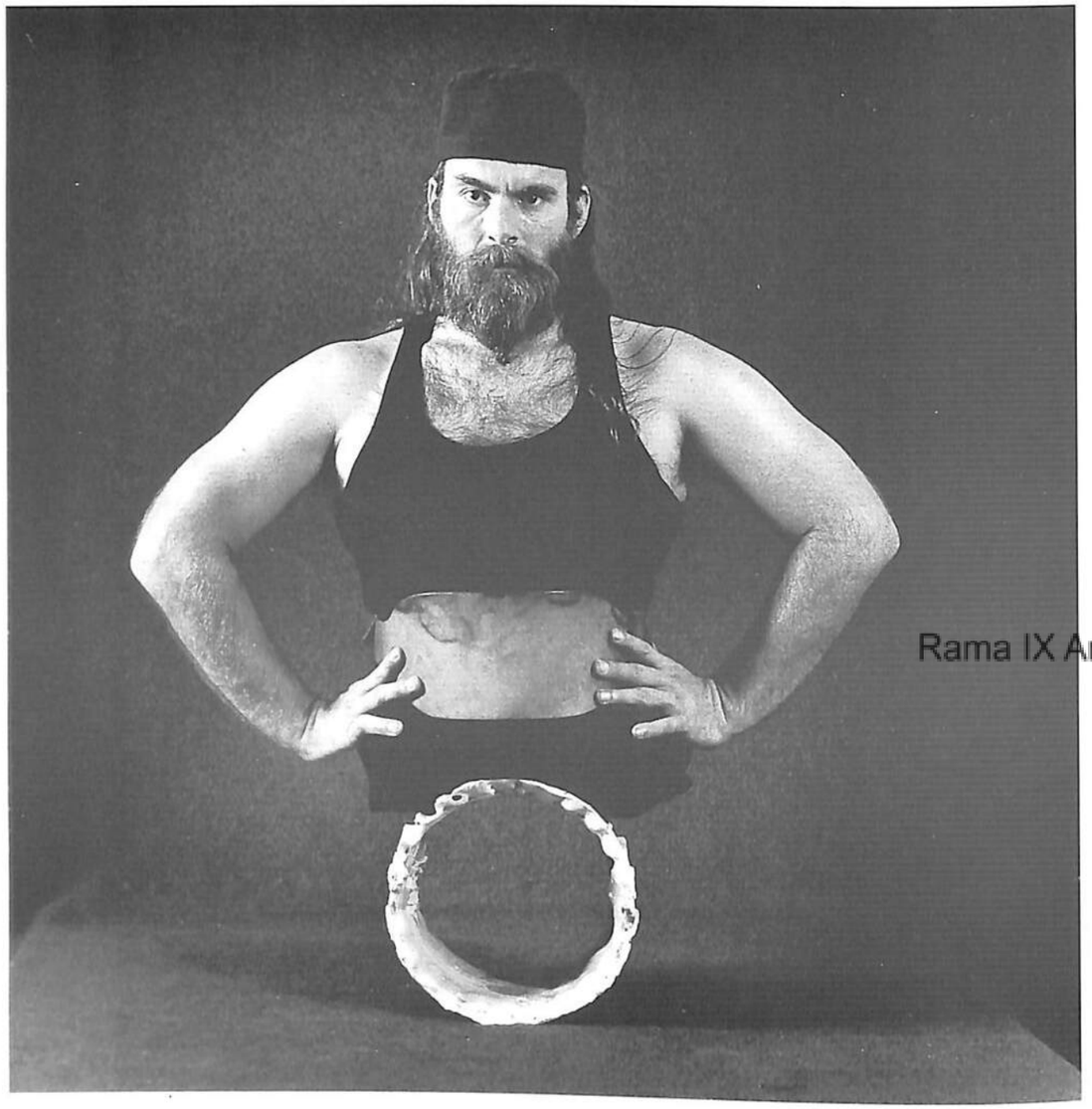


Claude Alexandre, *Untitled*, 1985, gelatin silver print, 50 x 60 cm.
Collection of Maison Européenne de la Photographie, Paris



George Dureau, *Bergamo Joseph Robinson*, 1994, gelatin silver print, 50.4 x 40.4 cm.
Collection of Maison Européenne de la Photographie, Paris

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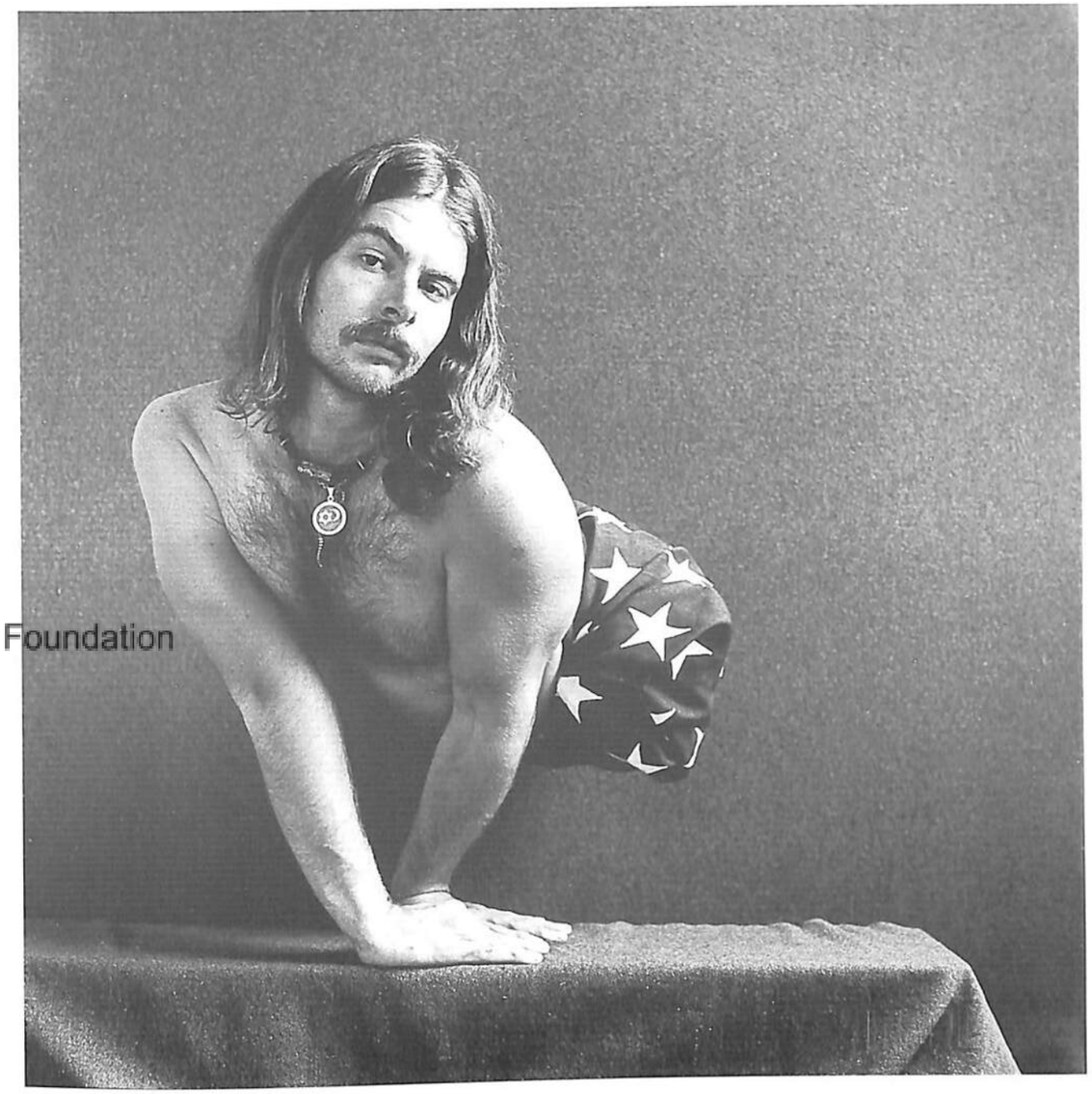

George Dureau, *Bergamo Joseph Robinson*, 1978, gelatin silver print, 51 x 40.5 cm.
Collection of Maison Européenne de la Photographie, Paris

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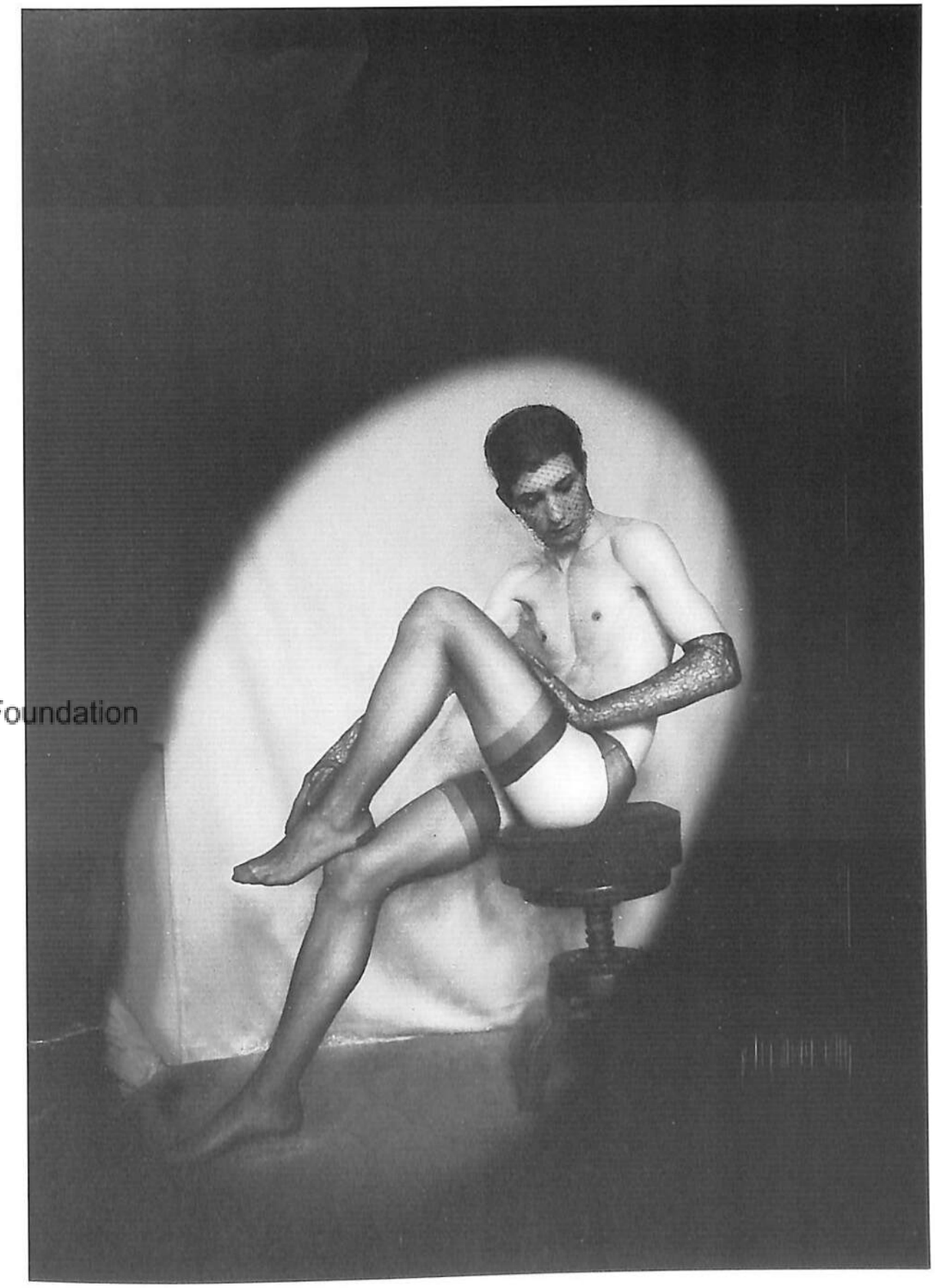
Dansoung Sungvornveshapan, *Nouveau Egoist, the Last Homo Sapiens*, 1997, silver print, 16 x 22 cm.,
Collection of the artist



Pierre Molinier, *Luciano Castelli*, 1974, photomontage, 12.5 x 17.5 cm.
Collection of Maison Européenne de la Photographie, Paris

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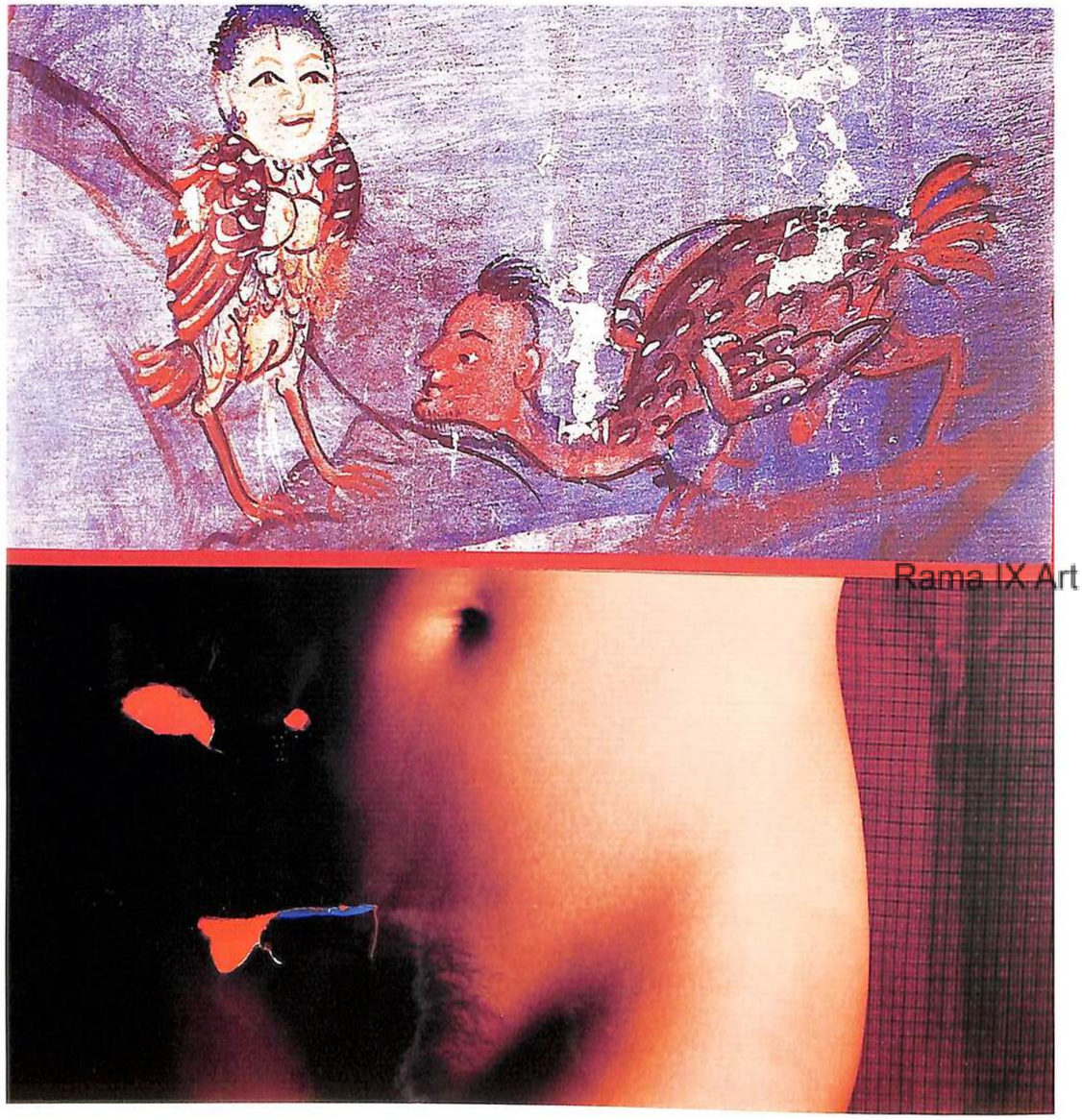
Jorge Damonte, *Copi*, 1984, gelatin silver print, 50.6 x 60.9 cm.
Collection of Maison Européenne de la Photographie, Paris

Michel Journiac, *24 Hours in the Life of an Ordinary Woman*, 1974, gelatin silver print, 50 x 39.3 cm.
Collection of Maison Européenne de la Photographie, Paris



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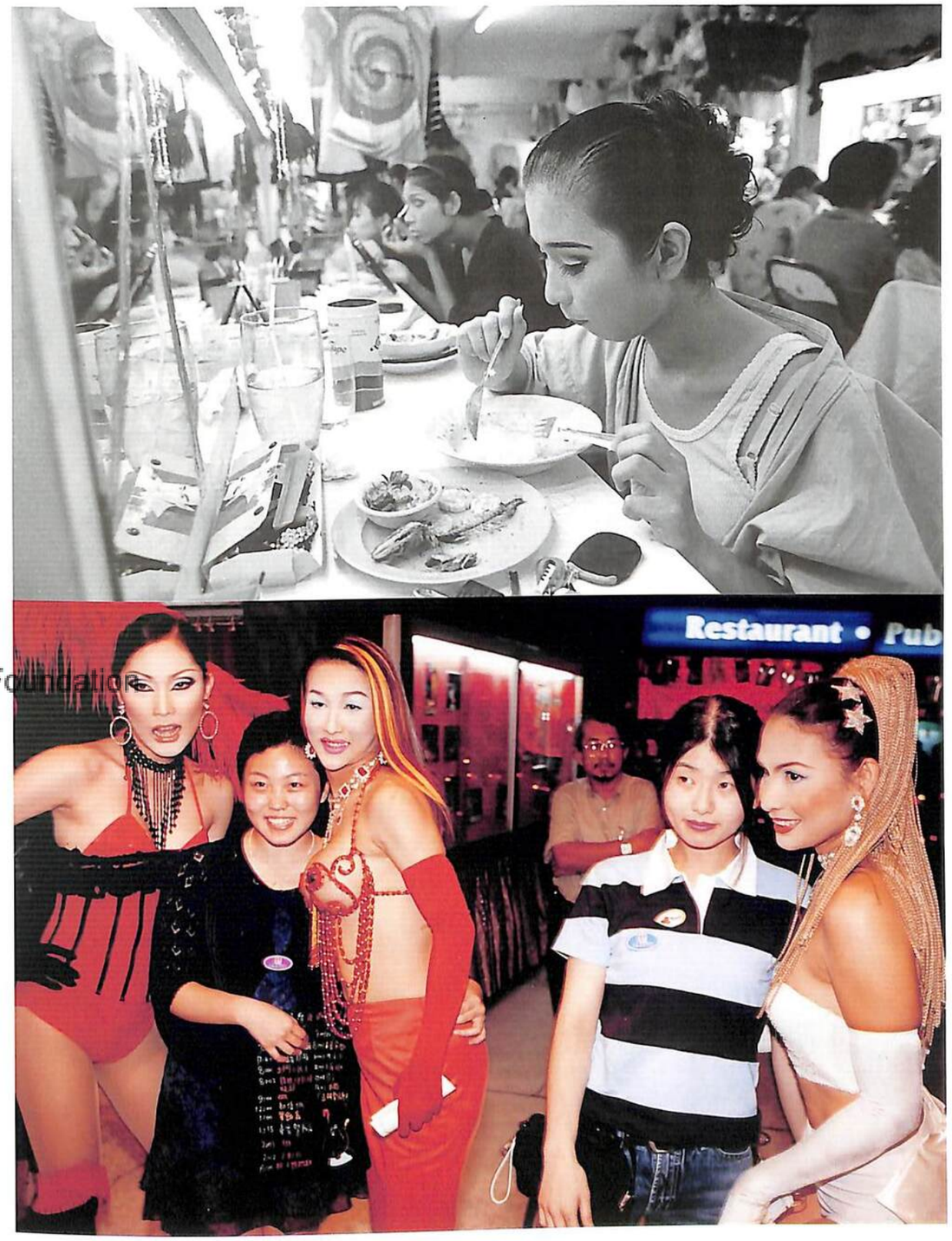
Niwat Kongpien, *Kharb loog kharb dorg 2* , 2001, color print, collection of the artist



Manit Sriwanichpoom, *Exotica 1*, 2001, color and gelatin silver print, collection of the artist