

# “Two women with a red dress”

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**Two women with a red dress**

Pedro Meyer © 2003

I was recently asked by a student of photography from South Africa, how the advent of digital imaging methods had impacted the traditional perceptions of documentary photography. I offered to take up his question in one of our editorials.

Before you continue, please look at the images above and write down on a piece of paper, only for yourself, if you think that the image is documentary in nature or not.

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I wanted to respond to our friend from Port Elizabeth, to further some ideas beyond the debate that we have already discussed previously, namely about the veracity of the image.

First it occurred to me that we should revisit the very notion of what constitutes a documentary photograph. I started by asking myself when is an image not a documentary picture? hoping to find the answer by posing the question in reverse. To try and find an answer, I went to a catalog of a recent biennial of photography to check out all the pictures published there. As I perused the catalog, every picture I came across convinced me that what I was looking at was documentary in one way or another, irrespective of the style of the image. Even images that were clear digital composites ended up making a good case for being considered documentary as well, obviously following their own logic.

What stood out in all of these examples was that the photographic image worked its magic of visual representation on the basis of our understanding of the real world as is perceived by the eye. Something we tend to call realism, even if that representation be out of focus (just remember the last time you were drunk). I believe that we have also made considerable progress in understanding how digital composites need not be any less “realistic” with regard to the documentary nature of its content as what had up to now been understood as “direct” photography.

The notion that “direct” photography somehow had the moral high ground for veracity has of course been proven wrong time and time again, and we need not revisit that debate any longer. However what has not been discussed, or at least not at great length, and I would like to bring up today, has to do with the border line when the representation has been constructed through other means which are not optical, although in the end it would end up becoming a photograph.

The image of the “Two women with a red dress”, is a case in point. The image is a composite of painting with real textiles. The point at which these materials became

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a photograph was when (a digital one at that) they were captured through the lens of the camera. One would then have to conclude that indeed what we are looking is a photograph. Yet their their origin is arguably not photographic. But then what about a picture of myself? I suppose that skin would stand in for the painting of the two faces, with no one questioning the validity of such a portrait taken of me with the aid of a camera as not being documentary in nature. So why would someone then consider that a picture such as “Two women with a red dress” be less documentary than a direct representation?

What we are faced with here are the visual challenges brought about by an ever changing panorama of what constitutes a photograph. As the digital tools we now have at our disposal enable us to cross barriers of what is possible to bring into the realm of the photograph, we have to remain vigilant to a prevalent predisposition for dismissing all that we had previously excluded as something that is non-photographic in nature.

**Pedro Meyer**

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