

**Karen Paulina
Biswell
&
Aicanon**

Hotel Villa Edén.

Exhibition at Hotel La Louisiane.
Nov. 2021. Paris.

Text by Jorge M. Sanguino

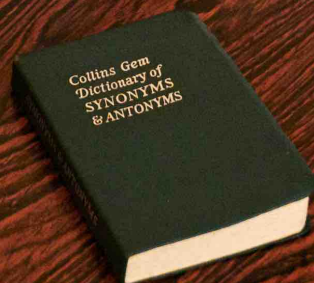
Room 21 of the hotel La Louisiane, Saint Germain district in Paris, hosts the exhibition of Karen P. Biswell and Aicanon Hotel Villa Eden, curated by Pascal Beausse. There are two reasons why the exhibition is in a hotel. The first is a thematic homogeneity. The "Villa Hotel Eden" series was developed at the Hotel Villa Eden in Nice during the summer of 2020. Restrictions had barely been lifted for the containment of the pandemic in France. For two weeks, Karen and Aicanon photographed each other.

The hotel, La Louisiane, is special. Its biography and mood has involved artists, writers and musicians. After the defeat at Waterloo, a colonel of Napoleon leaves for New Orleans where he makes a fortune. He returns to France in 1832 on Napoleon's death, and builds a hotel as a tribute to the United States of America and as a refuge for his former comrades-in-arms. The hotel survives the urban restructuring of Hussemann's Paris, and is during the 20th century home to musicians, including Miles Davis, John Coltrane, Jim Morrison, artists and writers such as Alberto Giacometti, Keith Haring, Lucian Freud, Ernest Hemingway, Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, Henry Miller and many others. The hotel La Louisiane is predestined for an exhibition inside its rooms.

But, "Hotel Villa Eden" occurs outside the "white cube" because it is limited and incapable in front of projects and emerging artworks of **relational practices**. By relational practices I mean to describe certain artistic practices that declare the inclusion of non-artist agents as essential to the production of the work. Unlike the classical painter-model, or photographer-model relationship, in which it is clear who is an artist, and who is a non-artist, relational practices annul the division between subject (painter, photographer, etc.) and object (model), and interrogate the theoretical and social discourses that are based on the notion of the identity of the "artist" (an ideology that is quite desirable and necessary to the art market).

Relational practice allows for new ways of negotiating with other identities, even those where processes of subjectivization do not occur, offering a more honest openness to the otherness that develops outside the art world. The photographic series "Hotel Villa Eden" is produced with this relational practice, which Karen P. Biswell has consistently developed since her projects with the Embera community in Colombia, and more recently with Maria Amilbia Siagama Siagama.

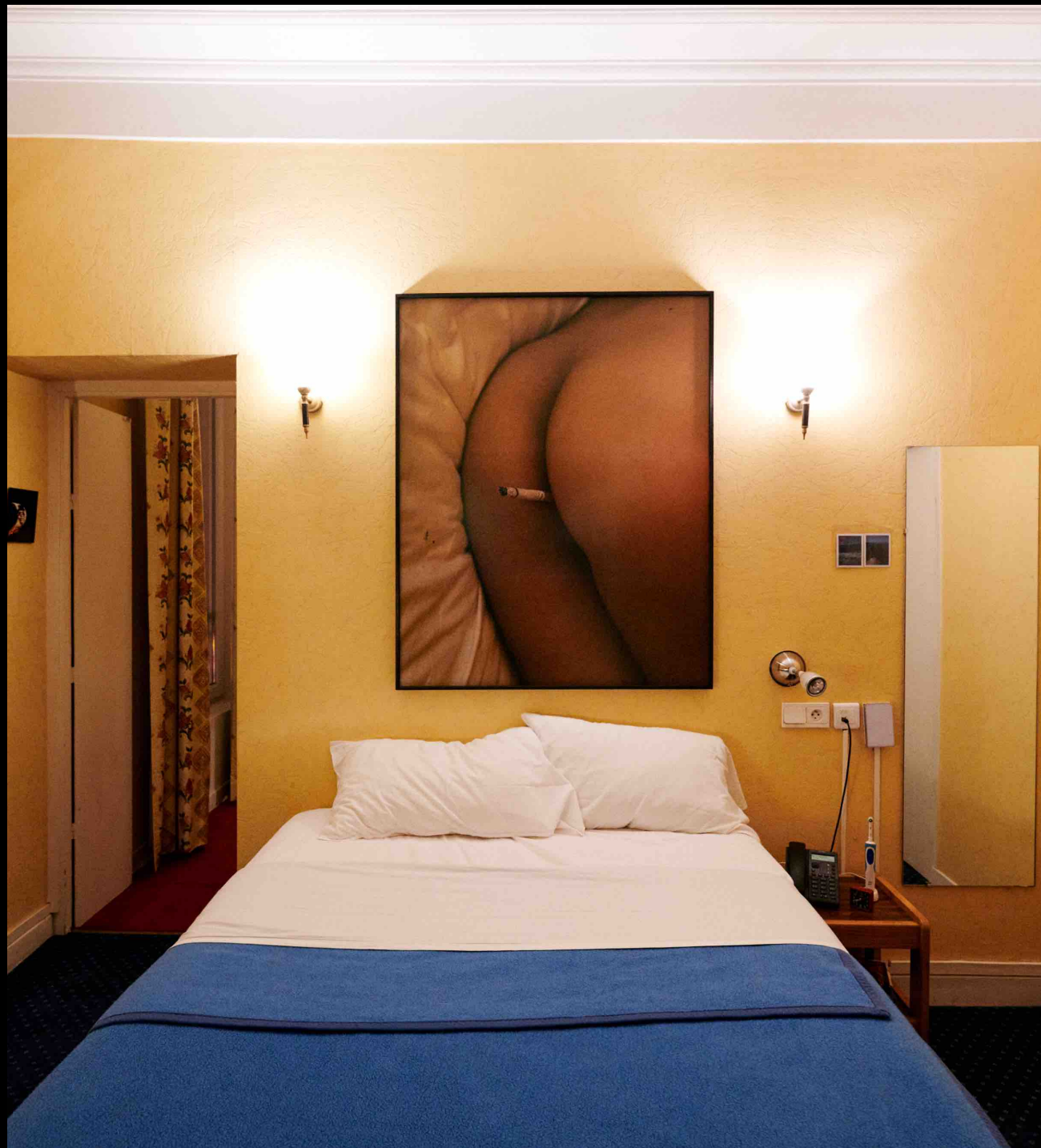
In "Hotel Villa Eden" Ai Canno, poet and jewelry designer, incorporates the artist subject, shifting from being a model to actively participate with Karen P. Biswell in questioning the "objectifying" gaze of photography. What do I mean by this? Photography transforms what appears in front of its lens into an object with diverse meanings. Objects of desire, (erotic photography) objects of political consciousness, (documentary photography) objects that incite consumption, (fashion photography) e.t.c.





We cross the Parisian streets of Saint Germain, so full of tourists and places for them, lucky of a dry and sunny autumn weather. At the hotel, the reception is at the back. It is small. From there we are greeted by the owner, who in French sends us up the spindly stairs to the second floor. On the right side of the corridor, the half-open door with the number 21. Just like that, one is plunged into another world whose threshold is a hotel room with two bedrooms and two bathrooms, decorated with the honesty of the years of an inn run by four generations.

The door leads to the first bedroom with cream-colored walls, a blue carpet floor and the double bed, which occupies a large part of the space, is dressed in the same color. The generous windows look out onto the Rue de Seine, cheerful on a Friday afternoon. A large-format photograph shows us a cigarette sticking out of a butt. "Fart Tabacco" (125 x 100 cm). The cigarette is still lit. The curves of the buttocks occupy most of the space, just a bit of the bed sheets are visible. A bold smoker: whose buttocks are they? Whose cigarette is it? Karen and Aicanon's relational practice begins to defeat the expectations of the observer who looks to the photograph to document the relationship of two women locked in a room during the summer.



In English there is the expression "just blowing smoke up my ass". Someone uses it when he thinks his interlocutor is just saying what he wants to hear. But the smoke is not coming in from the ass, but coming out of it, and that is the welcome for the visitor, as well as a warning. Here the anticipation of the observer is going to be disappointed. The photographs in "Hotel Villa Eden" are not produced to signify and respond to his desire. The artists are not going to show what we expect. With their exhibition they are going to defeat these anticipations through a slippery game between parodies, citations, variations, visual clichés and the different use of formats and techniques of photography, color and the creation of a space of inside and outside that has been masterfully produced with the help of the laboratorian Diamantino Quintas.

Let's go back to "Fart Tabacco". With this photograph, Aicanon and Karen P. Biswell quote Sarah Lucas's sleek white sculpture from the English Pavilion at the 2015 Venice Biennale. But they shorten its coldness and distance, creating an intimate space by placing it above the bed in the master bedroom.



The eye is drawn to the other walls of the main room. On the narrow desk is the kettle, with which Karen boils the water for the tea she offers her guests, and two photographs in portrait holders. Karen and Aicanon at sea and in bed, "Eden Fountain" (24 x 30 cm). The naturalness of these two pieces is irritating. They seem to have been there forever.

The second bedroom, smaller than the main one, is, with its red carpet and simple bed, even more intimate. The artists have explored this space without going beyond the border of visual exacerbation. Three large format photographs occupy the longest wall and the corner where the headboard is located. The visual syntax is clear, built with the quotation of a red tone in ranges from dark to more vivid.

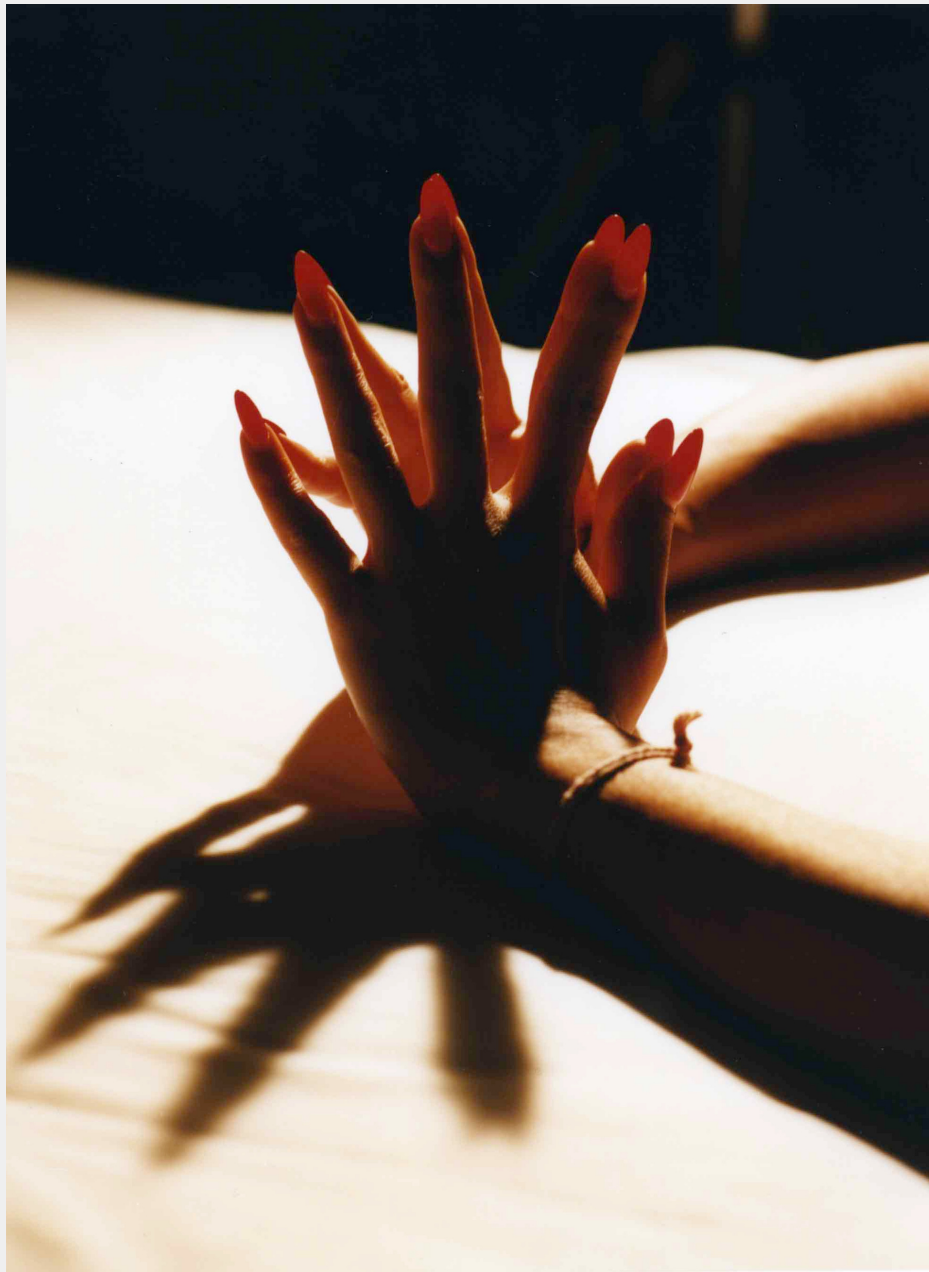


The portrait of the masked woman ("Untitled" 100 x 80 cm), with her fur coat, has been divided into two parts in its negative. The lower part has been shifted to the left, so that legs and hand do not coincide with the torso. The upper part of the negative, the face, looks at us without showing its eyes, from a corner of the hotel in Nice. The displacement of the visual will continue in the second photo: "Haircurtain" (80 x 95 cm) two open legs block with the fur coat, and the locks of hair the gaze of the voyeur looking for a new L'Origine du monde and the attitude of renunciation that incorporates Coubert's model. On the contrary, a fourth photo "Cage of Clarity" (50 x 60 cm), shows the flame of a lighter held by the hand in front of the pubis. The flame in the middle of the frame and the middle of the belly illuminates the body that attracts and warns. The moment the hand extinguishes the lighter all will be dark.

In "Hotel Villa Eden" Karen P. Biswell and Aicanon use a language of objects and fragments to assert relational practice. Sincere and without speculation the "props" are objects of everyday life, belonging to both of them, or to the hotel, declaring a joint ownership that rules out sole ownership. On the night table next to the bed in the master bedroom is the electric toothbrush, books, but also the alarm clock that appears in the photos, with which both artists make the viewer aware of the presence of time. Of the time of the confinement of the pandemic, of the time they have spent in the room, of the biological time in the cycles of nature and in the cycles of women. "Escaping with the moon" (18 x 21 cm) is a photo of the hand holding a representation of the moon on a dark background. The photo is out of focus, as if it moved from right to left faster than the speed of the camera shutter. A beautiful way of expressing a woman's link to the cycles of the moon and femininity through the time of photography.







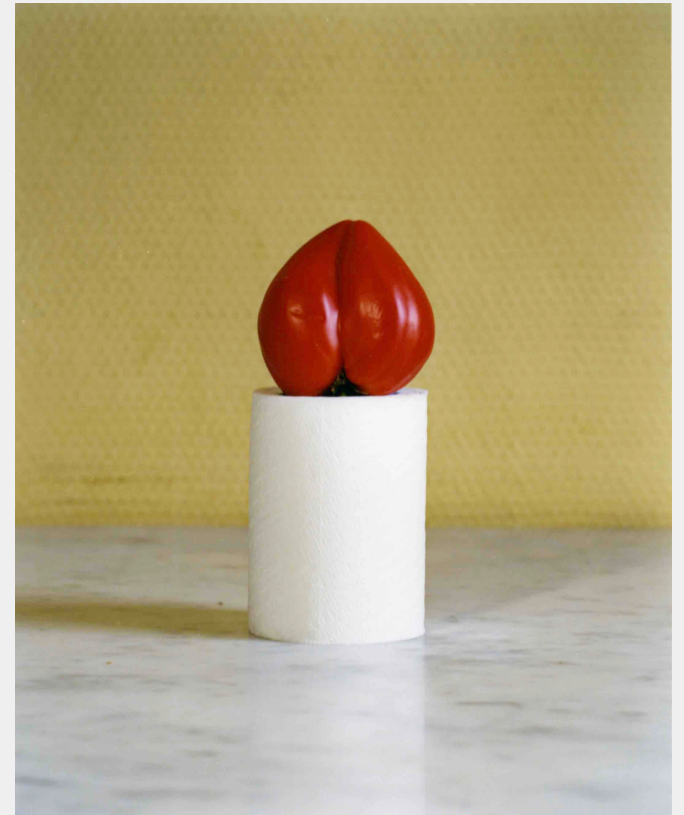
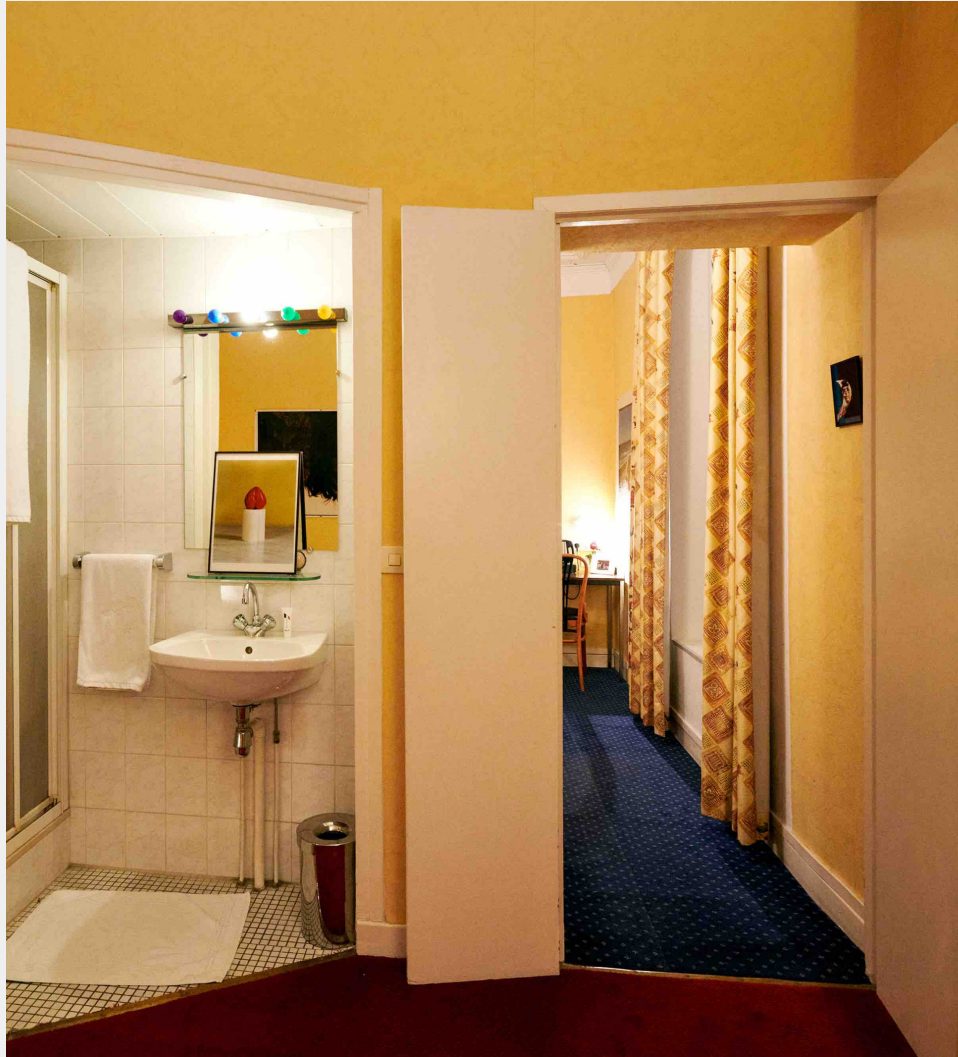
Similarly, the exercise of representing intimacy is affirmed by the use of body parts, avoiding a staging of the idea of female intimacy. "Scissorhands" the two hands together on the bed with their long nails with red polish cast the shadow in which only the sharp phalanges are visible. The tension between the fingers, the light coming from the background with which the hand is left in darkness opposes Dürer's front-lit hands, "Betende Hände" (in the Albertina Museum, 1508). The quote seeks to subtly counteract the images of art history, to open up space for new possibilities.

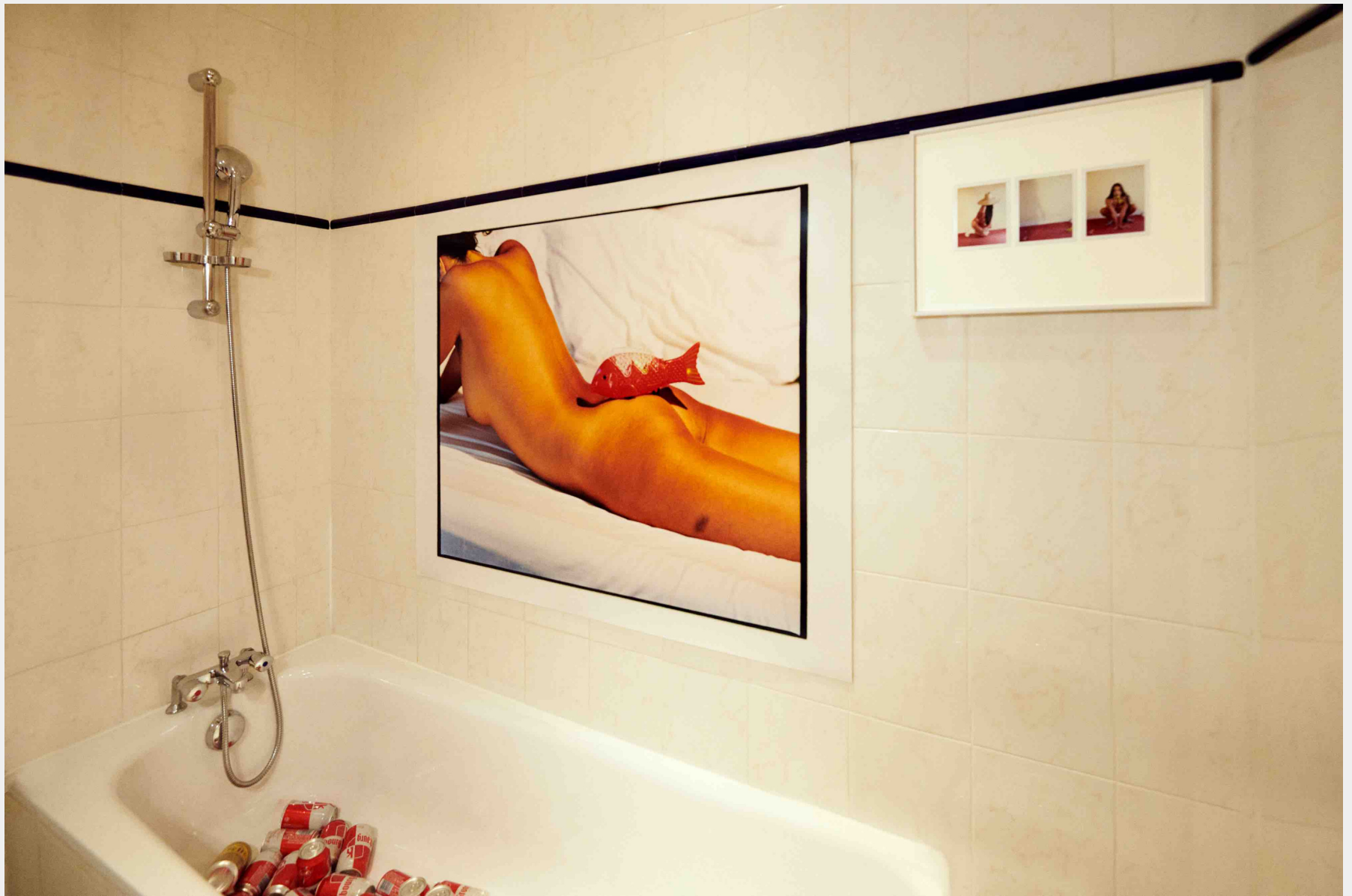
The "White Cube" has worked because it synthesizes the ideology of the artist as a subject whose place of reaffirmation is the exhibition in a space, a place conducive to the subsequent reception of the actors of the art system (curators, collectors, public, etc.). Institutional critique has concentrated on demonstrating the univocal significance that exhibition spaces create, that is, defining something as "art" by its mere spatial location within the White Cube. Furthermore, the critique emphasizes how that signification has been linked to mechanisms of exclusion and inclusion, feeding hegemonic discourses, which operate from flawed judgments and fallacies, for example, the artist as genius. Or the genius-male artist.

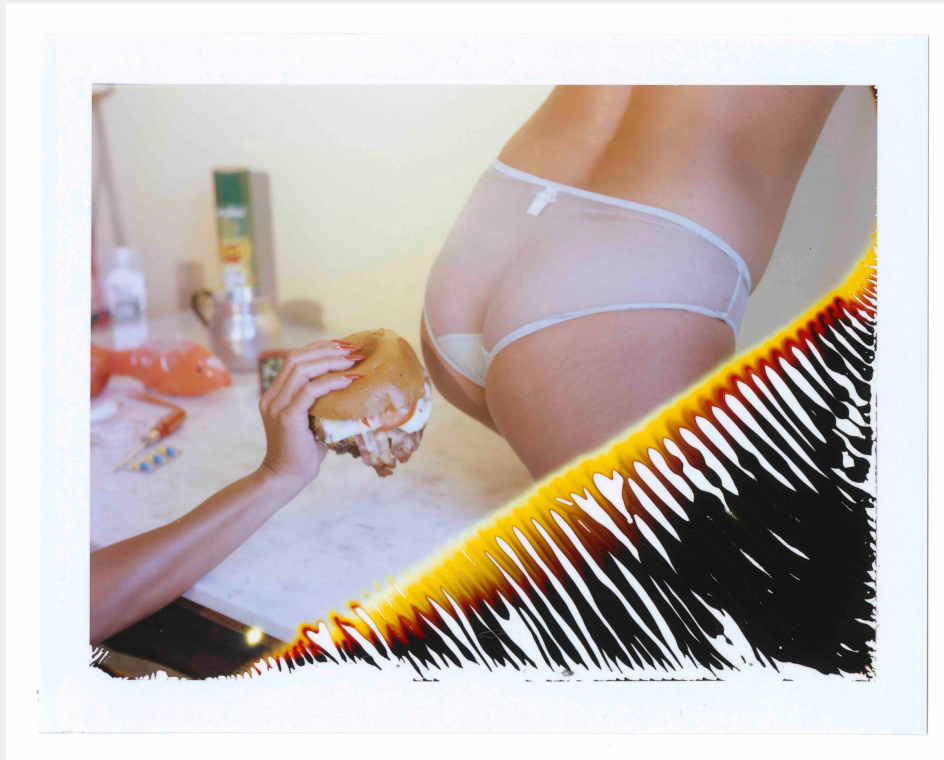
As "White Cube" is subordinated to the notion of the artist as subject, it excludes more complex practices that intervene the production of art in its classical form. Despite critical exercises from anti-colonial and gender theories, these have not been able to reconfigure the White Cube, (in part because of its use to sustain the fabric of the art market), allocating certain projects to certain spaces. Such as the "Museum of the Americas", "House of World Cultures", "Museum of the Arab World", etc., etc. But within the same White Cubes, exclusion zones are created for non-art, non-artists. How many museums and institutions in the world, galleries, also consider the bathroom as an exhibition area?



Let's go back to our hotel room in Paris. The bathrooms are exhibition venues: Karen P Biswell and Aicanon have integrated the two bathrooms with the exhibition, allowing the reflection of the mirrors to integrate the photographs on the opposite wall. "Thank you, always, merci" (30x40 cm) is an upright toilet paper roll with an ox heart tomato on top. "Ready Made" is in the middle of the frame, on a white marble table. The photo is leaning against the bathroom mirror in the small room. If one were to try to see oneself in the mirror, the image of oneself is coerced, and the internal appears: the toilet paper denoting digestion.







In the master bathroom over the bathtub hangs "Swimming In Your Eyes" (80 x 95 cm), a photo with a lot of humor, in which a plastic fish slides over the sleeve of the naked torso. Next to it appear the polaroids that have been an alternative medium of Karen P Biswell, and that in Hotel Villa Eden, has been used to take up again, the motifs of the other formats. "We found a new way to live" a hand holding the hamburger approaching the butt dressed in white pantyhose. A Google search on commercials featuring hamburgers and women, shows the plethora of advertisements that explicitly link the burger to a woman's sexuality and anatomy, simulating in some cases, eating a burger with an orgasm. Karen P Biswell and Aicanon parody the history of commercials that use "sex sells" as a strategy, even with hamburgers.

The polaroids function as a paraphrase that involves a continuous energy in reviewing and finding the right and true images that ensure that relational practice agencies an effective interrogation of photography and the gaze it exerts, particularly when it comes to the gaze on the feminine and intimacy.



Before leaving the room to return to the streets of Saint Germain, we observe once again the constant color palette that Hotel Villa Eden develops throughout the series. A color reminiscent of the Nouvelle Vague, the incunabula pieces of Rohmer and Godard, and the iconic times of the Victorine studios in Nice. This is the product of the continuous and collegial work that Karen P Biswell has been doing for many years with her laborer Diamantino, and that in this series has managed to gain a foothold through experiments.



The last photo to say goodbye is "Between Now and Now" a montage made from the two negatives, whose right side is a deep shot of the Mediterranean Sea struck by the light of the French Riviera, that blue that characterizes it, and that now hypnotizes us, and contrasts with its left side, in which we see in profile the naked belly and the legs bent over the bed on a red background. The hand again holds the clock on the belly, a new indication of femininity, of the relationship with biological time that either quarrels or complements the chronometer time, which has measured the time of confinement, the time of the inside and the time of the outside. It is noteworthy that the work of Karen P. Biswell and Aicanon masterfully develops the thermal and sensorial sensation of the outside and the inside, outside the sea, inside the room, introducing us into the structure of a narrative space that we begin to inhabit together with its two protagonists, facing a loss of our expectations and our gazes. Practically, we are not only in the room of La Louisiane, but also in the room of the Hotel Villa Eden looking at the blue sea going back and forth over the horizon..

Jorge M. Sanguino

Duesseldorf. 2021

Hotel Villa Edén

Karen P. Biswell
Aicanon

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The following catalog compiles the exhibition "Hotel Villa Eden" in Paris, at the Hotel La Louisiane. Nov. 2021.

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