



Imogen Cunningham, *Magnolia Blossom*, gelatin silver print, 9 1/8" x 11 1/2", 1925. The Marjorie and Leonard Vernon Collection, gift of The Annenberg Foundation and Carol Vernon and Robert Turbin. © 2008 The Imogen Cunningham Trust.

A Story of Photography: The Marjorie and Leonard Vernon Collection

LACMA, 5905 Wilshire Boulevard, Los Angeles
Through February 1

This exhibition ambushes unsuspecting museumgoers with full-throttled moments of terror and seduction to the point of redeeming every profane remark ever lodged against the medium. Here's a thought: gut the newly finished Broad Contemporary Art Museum (BCAM) and permanently display all 3,500 prints that Marjorie and Leonard Vernon spent the last thirty years harvesting from the prosaic millions they tirelessly swam through. It's not that everything currently at the BCAM deserves a fire sale (circle the wagons around the Rauschenbergs and Lichtensteins); the fact of the matter is that unparalleled photography collections like this one demand to see the light of day, every day, for as long as silver holds to paper and viewers who crave inexplicable imagery care to stand before them. Obviously intrepid swimmers (six days at Art 40 Basel, anyone?), the Vernons seemed not only blessed with the rare endurance that discriminating collecting demands but with an uncanny and enviable instinct for locating the unimpeachable image again and again.

Take Joseph Sudek's *White Flask and Egg*, circa 1950. This is a deceptively simple still life from the Czech master the uninitiated viewer might dismiss as just another hackneyed version of the everyday-objects-on-a-table formula that somehow still leads would-be artists down the road to affected sublimation. But take another look. The magic's in what's not there, or in what only insinuates: if the pitcher and egg are the figure/ground equation, then the accompanying "sky" above and behind weaves a chilling tale of horror, an emergent haunting that threatens to relocate these modest artifacts to some dark otherworld where all domestic civility is to be unmasked, revealing true terror's howling face. Robert Howlett's *Brunel aboard the Aphrodite, Liverpool 1857*, is steeped in biographical tragedy (Howlett died at the tender age of twenty-seven, a victim of the early and highly toxic darkroom chemistry): this equally unassuming photograph of the famous ship builder I.K. Brunel and unidentified companions who stand casually on the Aphrodite's deck pitches suddenly forward into

the viewer's calm sanity. If you were looking for a well-behaved, nautical-themed historical photograph that gently sails the captain's mantel, look again as a ghastly chill drains inexorably into your psyche.

But the Vernons also shopped for those explicit aphrodisiacs. Edward Weston's *Nude on Dunes — Oceano, 1936* transfigures erotic yearning into a cosmic Rock of Gibraltar, via Weston's wife's (Charis) well-anchored left buttock. Here sand becomes proxy to immense galactic tides that ripple symbiotically around the persistent female body, which in turn answers these grainy currents with allocations of anthropomorphic meaning and carnal substance. Near the gallery entrance, *Zaclona* by František Drtikol relocates the unguarded female to interior studio theatricality; a patterned, sheer curtain never hung with such unambiguous sexual desire, with such wanton invitation. It feels like Leonard and Marjorie had a healthy marriage.

Sadly, only seventy-five black-and-white prints from this powerhouse collection are currently available for viewing. How Charlotte Cotton, the Museum's photography curator, and her assistant, Eve Schillo, ever managed to chop 3,500 immeasurable photographs down to a scant seventy-five is testament either to their surgical skill or their masochistic desire to reenact *Sophie's Choice*. For now, make the pilgrimage to the downstairs level of the Ahmanson Building where Tony Smith's equally unimpeachable sculpture *Smoke* stands guard just outside the show's entrance, a towering black sentinel whose geometric musings on the infinite share a certain time/space distortion, a *Twilight Zone* warping, with her interim Vernon companions.

— Darrin Little