

# VERONICA BAILEY

PHOTOGRAPHIC CRITICISM OF THE PREVALENCE OF MODERN MYTHS HYEYOUNG SHIN | ART CRITIC

“One day I was at the barber’s and a copy of Paris-Match was offered to me. On the cover, a young black soldier in a French uniform was saluting in a military manner, with his eyes uplifted, gazing on a fold of the tricolor flag... Whether naively or not, I saw very well what it signified to me: that France was a great Empire, that all her sons, without any color discrimination, faithfully served under her flag”. In his celebrated book entitled ‘Mythologies’ (1957) Roland Barthes asserted emphatically the need for ‘demythification’ upon his discovery of the operation of ‘modern mythology’ in the realm of the infinite number of social phenomena. The above-mentioned image of a young black man saluting the flag from the bottom of his heart acts, in fact, as a sort of myth contributing to the beautification and justification of the history of French imperialism, and one needs to distinguish the ‘connotation’ hidden behind such ‘denotation’.

Modern Myths (2011), one of the recent works of the English photographer Veronica Bailey, is closely related to this Barthes’s theory about mythology. Bailey translates ancient Greek gods as the very genesis of existent human beings into modern myths—the various kinds of the mass media, and especially the newspaper, which is one of the most traditional media. The subjects are the different sections of rolled newspapers, and the resulting images are decided by the colors and number of the pages of newspaper and the intensity of the grasp and the resulting shape. As a result, the images produced by photographing twelve different newspapers are personified as twelve Greek Olympian deities who have their own symbolisms. Although the photographs of the newspapers located in the middle of the dark background are in themselves still lifes, consequently, they are seen as some kinds of ‘portraits’ together with the titles referring to different Greek mythological figures. The protagonists are Aphrodite, Apollo, Ares, Artemis, Athena, Demeter, Hephaestus, Hera, Hermes, Hestia, Poseidon and Zeus. One’s habit of decoding to pair the signifier to the signified in every case of sign is naturally applied to the connection of the images of the newspapers to the symbolic meanings of each deity, and such efforts seem to succeed from time to time to some extent. For example, the smooth double curvilinear lines emphasized by the exuberant layers of paper are deliberately devised so as to link them to Hephaestus, the god of fire and metalworkers. Yet the matching of each image and its corresponding text is actually established in accordance with the artist’s subjective impression and intuition, and thus the relation between them is undoubtedly arbitrary as in the voluntary relation between the signifier and the signified in the domain of language. The ratiocination of the relationship between image and text while going between them may, therefore, be a sportive mode of appreciating Modern Myths, but it fails to help one to penetrate the original intention of the artist. Rather, it is more likely that the artist sees an operation of ‘mythification’ in the one-to-one correspondence between the signified and the signifier and between text and image, and casts a tacit criticism against it.

Bailey’s attempt for the demythification of the newspaper by employing the subject matters of ancient myths occurs in two different horizons. One is to debilitate the power of the newspaper by presenting it as ‘unreadable text’. The artist censures the universal belief that the media delivers reality as it is by re-present text, which can be characterized as the mediatic core of the newspaper, through unreadable new images. Today, one hesitates to doubt that he or she can be informed of all the incidents occurring throughout the world through various channels of the mass media, but in reality the development of the media is accompanied by all the more distortion and manipulation of facts due to its collusion with capital and power. In this respect, the artist argues for the existence of truths totally detached from one’s belief behind the countless phenomena distributed through the media. The other horizon of her Modern Myths is to diminish the absolute power of the media by forcing one to ‘be confronted with the materialistic nature’ of the newspaper. The artist’s use of the technique of high definition close-up for the delicate depiction of the texture of paper and the unique edge peculiar to the newspaper reveals the undeniable fact that the newspaper is nothing but cheap paper that is destined to be disposed upon the completion of its service to deliver the news stories for the day (or for the week), and this allows the artist to impair the status of the myths of the media.

Another intriguing aspect of Modern Myths is it has another image besides those of the twelve deities—a photograph entitled ‘Olympus,’ borrowed from the name of the mountain on which their temple stood. The seat of the thirteenth god of the Greek mythology that is supplanted by the image of Olympus is originally of Hades, ‘the king of the dead’ who has stayed on the throne of the Underworld. Bailey replaced this ‘seat of the god of the dead’ with the front page of the Financial Times on which the picture of 9/11 is printed. The message that the artist aims to convey is disclosed through Olympus, which is the only image of the series that shows content (image instead of text), on behalf of the other twelve images. The terrorist attack on the World Trade Center as the attack against the symbolic building located in the heart of Wall Street in Manhattan, New York in the United States, one of the most champion fans of capitalism is, above all, an assault on the capitalist system and entails the rupture of the myth

of the seemingly perfect and indestructible system of capitalism. What deserves one's attention is that the image chosen by the artist shows the skyline of Manhattan without the World Trade Center after the demolition of the building, unlike the images on many other newspapers in which the building is being burnt owing to the explosion. This choice by the artist induces an inimitable experience through which one receives the incident as an *ex post facto* index after the explosion, rather divergent from the sense of unreality caused by the view of a photograph of the explosion. Bailey states that the image "made her see death as 'a space' ". This may explain why she decided to use for the thirteenth photograph not a god but the place where gods resided. As a matter of fact, this 'presence of absence' is the very fundamental property of myths. This attribute of myth is well exemplified by ancient Greek sculptures whose faded colors and damaged parts have been deeply carved in the mind of the artist. For as mythological gods are present under one's very eyes even today, regardless of the present status quo of them or the truth about their existence, it is the mechanism of myth to lead one to a natural belief in what it is now regardless of the historical origin of its formation.

Hermes Baby (2011),[1] another recent photographic series of Bailey, which was made in the same time frame as the production of *Modern Myths*, deals with the theme of war, which is one of the typical modern myths. After the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the U. S. went to war under the pretext of her security and world peace, and the majority of her people unquestionably accepted the public necessity and legitimacy of the war that their nation insisted. This myth of war took the lives of numerous civilians extraneous to the actual terrorist attack, and it still enabled to frame the other party as the wrongdoer. This does not apply just to the case of the U.S., as historically every war has maintained itself with the help of its mythification. Today, one is not freed from the myths of war since not only the mere outbreaks of armed conflicts but also such doctrines as cultural imperialism and neoliberalism that dominate the entire world by use of the logic of power still operate themselves as myths. *Hermes Baby* takes as its subject matter the book[2] in which Marguerite Higgins, American war journalist and the first female Pulitzer Prize winner, wrote about her experiences of the Korean War. The artist selected from Higgins' writings several phrases consisting of a few words that resonated with her, used a specific font of 'Baby Hermes' to write the text, converted the digital images of the words into 35mm analog film negatives, developed them manually in the dark room, and handprinted them onto slips of vintage photographic paper made in the 1950s whose size is of a name card. Then, she arranges four sets of four photographs into four square boxframes.[3]

These photographs are differentiated from both her previous works and any other's photographic pieces in, by large, two respects. One is her own distinctive photographic technique to obtain images through the exposure of light, not camera shooting. Unlike most of the large-scale digital photographs that are imbued concentratively with the action of the photographer in the case of camera shooting, in these small-sized analogue photographs, weight is attached to the later part of the making process of placing images on film negatives and to attain images on sensitized paper—as in the case of some conventional photo-making techniques such as Rayogram and solarization that acquire images by the utilization of light exposure technique. Especially in this series, the artist attempts for the intervention of the present in the past in terms of both content and material by re-writing the texts about war made in the 1950s on the printing paper produced during the very decade. In fact, in this work, the creative activity of the artist is related not to content but to selection, and formally, it is confined to a passive mode since it consists not of camera shooting but the processes of film conversion, development, and printing. Yet the artist's present interference allows the content of the past war to be disseminated in a different context and permits the paper made in the past to be given a new light today. Here, a myth is suggested in the respect that the text and the paper are still present today despite that they are clearly historical entities of the past and the idea of demythification in the respect that nevertheless their contexts and significances fail to be transformed.

What makes *Hermes Baby* distinguish itself, more importantly, is the fact that its subject is text. It is not frequent for text not image—linguistic signs instead of iconic ones—to be represented in a photograph. This owes to certain convention, yet it is because unlike iconic signs premised upon the concept of resemblance, linguistic signs in which the signifier and the signified have a voluntary relationship have difficulty in the direct delivery of the significance of the referent. On the other hand, linguistic signs have the capacity to be much more enriched in terms of one's mental image and imagination while their meanings are subject to change depending who uses and interprets them. In *Hermes Baby*, the expressions related to color and the descriptions of situations that Bailey have chosen—'Green Soldiers', 'A Purple Heart', and 'Red Shells' or 'Turn and Bolt', 'Nightmare Alley', and 'Graveyard Foxholes'—invoke different images in the minds of different viewers. And such mental images generate a still wider arena of imagination than explicit depictions of images. This effect bred by the use of text is doubled by Bailey's choice to interrelate it to the form of printing paper. The shape of paper with randomly curled-in edges during the process of printing makes the paper to be seen not as a simple piece of paper but a flag or a handkerchief. One is here reminded of a white flag to signal the termination of the war or handkerchiefs waving in the hands of the family members of a soldier who is heading to the battle ground. As some objects stimulating specific sentiments, these photographs engender mental images and imagination of an eclectic variety of dimensions, which are extended by the company of texts relevant to the war. What is attention-grabbing

here is that the images of the cruel and harsh reality of the war is attenuated and assuaged by Bailey's choices of the contents of the texts, of the type of font, and the way in which they are presented to be isolated within the white background while it is being transformed to be seen as not so grave rhetoric expressions. This is how Bailey seeks after the demythification of the war. What the artist wants to tell here is that the collective consciousness of honor and pride shared among the American soldiers who had participated in the Korean War is no more than a false consciousness fabricated by their personal internalization of the government's positions. In other words, the intention is to expose about the myth of what is called 'vanilla ice cream': those young men carried out their mission devotedly not for such a great cause but in order to be able to come back to their ordinary lives that they enjoyed prior to the war. The collision between the phrases 'Vanilla-Ice-Cream' placed next to the phrase 'Frozen Dead' undeniably embodies such a myth of the war.

Barthes says, "Myth is an act of speech". That is, the formation of a myth is not confined to a specific object or subject, but it can be formulated in every "system of communication" and every "mode of signification". And Barthes does not forget to stress that myth is "a type of speech chosen by history". The subjects that Bailey has taken as the subject matters for her photographic works—the books on the shelves of certain historical figures and the letters corresponded between them, newspaper pages on which recent particular moments are published, and texts of the past experiences of wars—are all related to 'speech chosen by history'. What should be noticed is that most of them are presented as new visual signs materialized by the minimal intervention of the artist without revealing the information about the content of speech, or even when the content of speech is disclosed, it is with a wholly different meaning. This coherently maintained mode of Bailey has tempted her to do photographic inquiries into the relationships between text and image and between linguistic and iconic signs and results in the implicit revelation of the prevalence of modern myths and their falsehood. This is what is most important in the achievements of Barthes, and Bailey has accomplished and will continue to do so what Barthes did theoretically through a different language of art. And it is a world of clarity and fertility.

[1] The title 'Hermes Baby' is borrowed from the model name of the typewriter used by Higgins in the battlefield and is relevant to the font 'Baby Hermes' that Bailey used for the concerned work.

[2] Marguerite Higgins, *War in Korea: The Report of a Woman Combat Correspondent* (Doubleday & Co, Inc, New York, 1951)

[3] Hermes Baby consists of four sets each of which is comprised of four photographs: [Group 1] Frozen Dead, Vanilla-Ice-Cream, Green Soldiers, and Gallant Hell; [Group 2]: Turn and Bolt, Graveyard Foxholes, Perfect Target, and Hopeless Odds; [Group 3]: Rush of Fear, Red Shells, Nightmare Alley, and Bruising Truth; [Group 4]: Possible Danger, A Purple Heart, In Cold Blood, and Blew in Half.