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The Command to Look: The Nudes of William Mortensen

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Ryerson University

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THE COMMAND TO LOOK:
THE NUDES OF WILLIAM MORTENSEN

by

Heather Pridemore,
BFA, University of South Florida, May 2007

A thesis presented to Ryerson University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements of
the Master's degree
in the Program of
Photographic Preservation and Collections Management

Toronto, Ontario, Canada, 2010

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ABSTRACT

The Command to Look: The Nudes of William Mortensen considers the use of the female form by William Herbert Mortensen (American, 1897-1965), who during his life was a prominent pictorialist photographer, writer, and teacher. The aim of this thesis is to better understand Mortensen's work through an examination of his most prominent subject matter – the nude.

This study focuses on 43 prints and negatives from the permanent collection of the George Eastman House International Museum of Photography and Film. Mortensen was chosen because he and his work represent a period in the history of American photography that is given relatively little attention.

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DEDICATION



*In the world's ultimate opinion he may fail, but at least he will have dealt with man-sized problems.**

This thesis is dedicated to all those who have supported me throughout my life and believed that I would be *somebody* someday.

* William Mortensen, *Projection Control* (San Francisco: Camera Craft Publishing Company, 1934), 30.

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis considers the use of the female form by William Herbert Mortensen (1897-1965). The aim is to better understand Mortensen's work through an examination of his most prominent subject matter – the nude. This research focuses on Mortensen because he represents a period in the history of American photography that is given relatively little attention and his use of and writing on the subject matter is extensive.

It is generally agreed upon by most histories of photography that the pictorialist movement began around the end of the nineteenth century and ended in 1917 when Alfred Steiglitz, head of the Photo-Succession, published the last issue of *Camera Work*, a publication dedicated to pictorialist photography. Pictorialism established photography as an art, which ultimately permitted the use of the nude – which continues to be a widely used genre.

The nude has played an important role in the history of art, but Mortensen saw it as being specifically useful to photography. Mortensen's writings stress two important factors in the production of a good picture: technical skill and proper use of the model. The model is key to Mortensen's work because the model allows the viewer to empathize or feel themselves into the image. This is accomplished by appeal to the universal human emotions of sex, sentiment, and wonder. Of the three, Mortensen relies heavily on the theme of sex to interest his audience and, of course, the nude is apt material for this type of subject matter.

This thesis begins with a literature survey, showing that the literature about Mortensen is limited both in quantity and content. Most sources are concerned with the debate that took place between Mortensen and Ansel Adams (1902-1984) in the 1930s

and with Mortensen's lack of representation in the history of photography.¹ Very few sources examine either Mortensen's writing or photographs, and none compare the two in order to better understand the artist's career.

The thesis then explores Mortensen's life. This short biography summarizes Mortensen's influences and places him within the context of the history of photography in order to better understand the time period in which his work was created.

In the section following, titled "The Look of William Mortensen's Photographs," we examine some of the technical applications and terminologies from Mortensen's technical books in order to better understand why the images look the way they do. This section includes information on Mortensen's negatives, choices in lighting, printing and handwork methods.

In the final section, "The Model," we look at Mortensen's photographs. We break them into Mortensen's self-defined categories of characters, nudes, and grotesques and then determine their compositional appeal as well as the kind of nude being represented. Additionally, we are looking for common traits and topics of subject interest that are consistent in Mortensen's work.

Mortensen was a prolific writer and there are nine books that comprise his career. His texts range from technical manuals to books containing a combination of theory, aesthetics, and instruction. The titles that encompass his career are: *Projection Control*, *Pictorial Lighting*, *Monsters & Madonnas*, *The Model: A Book on the Problems of Posing*, *The Command to Look: A Formula for Picture Success*, *Print Finishing*,

1. William Mortensen and Ansel Adams both submitted articles to Camera Craft in the 1930s defending their stances on art photography. Mortensen represented the pictorialists of the era who believed in the manipulation of their photographs and Ansel Adams represented the Group f/64 which promoted straight photography.

*Mortensen on the Negative, Outdoor Portraiture: Problems of Face and Figure in Natural Environment, and Flash in Modern Photography.*² In addition to his books Mortensen also published a series of brochures and magazine articles. His series of brochures, *The Mortensen System*, published in 1954 features the titles: “The Female Figure,” “The Paper Negative” and “The Texture Screen.”³ From 1933 to 1961, Mortensen’s articles appear in several different photo magazines, period examples include: *Camera Craft, Popular Photography, International Photographer* and *American Photography*. Most of these articles served as foundational material for one of his books or were one of his books edited down and presented in the form of an article or series of articles. Many of his books were published several times and in multiple printings. Due to this fact it was impossible to undertake a complete survey of his photographic work and writing for this thesis. Instead, the research related to this topic focused on only first edition printings of each of his nine monographs and examined only nudes and partial nude photographs of the female figure that reside within the permanent collection at the George Eastman House International Museum of Photography and Film. There are approximately 150 photographic objects in the permanent collection that are attributed to William Mortensen. The collection consists of two complete portfolios, as well as loose prints and negatives. About half of the Mortensen collection is comprised of photographs

2. William Mortensen, *Projection Control* (San Francisco: Camera Craft Publishing Company, 1934); *Pictorial Lighting* (San Francisco: Camera Craft Publishing Company, 1935); *Monsters and Madonnas* (San Francisco: Camera Craft Publishing, 1936); *The Model: A Book on the Problems of Posing* (San Francisco: Camera Craft Publishing, 1937); *The Command to Look: A Formula for Picture Success* (San Francisco: Camera Craft Publishing, 1937); *Print Finishing* (San Francisco: Camera Craft Publishing, 1938); *Outdoor Portraiture: Problems of Face and Figure in Natural Environment* (San Francisco: Camera Craft Publishing, 1940); *Mortensen on the Negative* (New York: Simon & Schuster Inc., 1940); and *Flash in Modern Photography* (San Francisco: Camera Craft Publishing, 1941).

3. William Mortensen, *The Mortensen System: The Female Figure* (Newport Beach: Jay Curtis Publications, 1954); *The Mortensen System: The Paper Negative* (Newport Beach: Jay Curtis Publications, 1954); *The Mortensen System: The Texture Screen* (Newport Beach: Jay Curtis Publications, 1954).

of the nude or partial nude; the remainder of the collection consists of Hollywood stars, costumed female models, male models and a few landscapes. For the purposes of this thesis we will be examining 43 images made up of both prints and negatives. In some cases, we will examine the same image in different formats or from different sources; in other instances we will be looking at images likely taken for similar purposes or during the same session with the model. Not all the qualifying negatives and photographs will be discussed in this paper as some of the objects are only attributed to Mortensen and the scope of this thesis was not enough to confirm Mortensen as the creator. This essay does not profess to be a comprehensive study of Mortensen's work. Instead it provides a starting point for the exploration of the subject, adding to the current knowledge that exists.

LITERATURE SURVEY

Most of the knowledge about William H. Mortensen and his work is contemporaneous with his lifetime and generally self-authored. Generally what little information exists about Mortensen places him in history as an out of date pictorialist fighting a losing battle against the f/64 Group.⁴ There are a few historians, such as Christian A. Peterson, Jorge Lewinski, and Naomi Rosenblum, who recognize Mortensen as working in a post Photo-Succession pictorialist aesthetic or as a precursor to artists like Jerry Uelsmann because of his use of montage and *grotesque* subject matter. He is discredited or reinterpreted in many of the histories of photography and in some cases he is omitted all together.⁵ A few critics and historians, such as A.D. Coleman, Deborah Irmas, and Larry Lytle have championed him. However, they focus on his place in history, which leaves a gap in general information about his writings and photographs as well as a lack of critical evaluation of his artistic career.

Mortensen had been dead only a decade when in the mid-1970s A.D. Coleman included him in his article, “The Directorial Mode – Notes Toward a Definition.”⁶ Coleman places Mortensen at the climax of the purism/directorial debate, which he believes has been building up throughout the history of photography. According to Coleman, “the clash between these two opposing camps came to a head on the pages of *Camera Craft*.”⁷ Beginning in 1934, articles by Ansel Adams (representing the f/64

4. For more information on the f/64 Group please see the “Biography and Historical Context” section pages 19 & 20.

5. There is no mention of Mortensen in *A New History of Photography* (1998) edited by Michel Frizot or *Photography: a cultural history* (2002) by Mary Warner Marien.

6. A.D. Coleman, “The Directorial Mode-Notes Toward a Definition,” *Artforum* (September, 1976).

7. Vicki Goldberg, ed., *Photography in Print: writings from 1816 to the present* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981) 489-90. Originally published A.D. Coleman, “The Directorial Mode-Notes Toward a Definition,” *Artforum* (September, 1976).

group or purists) and William Mortensen (representing the pictorialists or those working in the directorial mode) argued for the aesthetics of their respected groups; neither really won the argument. Coleman alludes to the fact that Mortensen's lack of representation in history is purposeful in a footnote that reads:

From the first one in 1937 to the most recent of 1964, no edition of Beaumont Newhall's *The History of Photography: From 1839 to the Present Day* – the standard reference in the field – so much as mentions the name of William Mortensen. It will be instructive to see whether the forthcoming edition – a major revision supported by the Guggenheim Foundation – rectifies this omission.

In fact, none of the books on the history of twentieth-century photography refers to Mortensen. If this could be considered even an oversight, the only question it would raise would concern standards of scholarship. Since, it cannot be construed as anything less than a conscious choice, however, the issue is not only competence but professional ethicality.⁸

At the time of Coleman's article, the standard histories of photography included Helmut and Alison Gernsheim's, *The History of Photography: from the camera obscura to the beginning of the modern era*, and Beaumont and Nancy Newhall's, *The History of Photography: from 1839 to present day*, neither mention Mortensen.

The following year Deborah Irmas, inspired by the A.D. Coleman article, published her argument for Mortensen titled, "Monsters & Madonnas." Irmas uses the popularity of Mortensen's main text, *Monsters & Madonnas: A Book of Methods*, as a way to question why he is excluded from the history of photography. She examines the argument that unfolded between the two opposing groups as well as the output of published works from the f/64 group. Ultimately, her article is quite similar to Coleman's except for the fact that she views Mortensen as neither purist nor pictorialist. She states, "Mortensen saw virtue and vice in all approaches to photography.... he was firmly

8. Vicki Goldberg, ed., *Photography in Print: Writings from 1816 to the Present* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1981), 489.

opposed to...technical and creative barriers, which limited the possibilities of the medium.”⁹

In 1977, Coleman includes Mortensen in his text, *The Grotesque in Photography*.¹⁰ He defines the *grotesque unrealities* as “non- or antiliteral evocations of dreams, fantasies, visions, and hallucinations.”¹¹ Other artists presented with Mortensen include: Weegee, Brassai and Jerry Uelsmann, just to name a few. This is the first of Coleman’s texts to include illustrations and descriptions of Mortensen’s photographs and process.

Coleman follows up with his book, *Depth of Field: Essays on Photography, Mass Media, and Lens Culture*, in which he includes a chapter about Mortensen, “Conspicuous by his Absence: Concerning the Mysterious Disappearance of William Mortensen.” In the article Coleman sets the context for the Mortensen/Adams debate, elaborates on the importance of Mortensen’s role in the history of photography, and concludes with how he came to know about Mortensen’s omission from the history books. In order to rectify the situation Coleman suggests that the following be done:

first, a definitive exhibit and monograph on Mortensen’s imagery, to establish its scope, its volume, its issues, and its relevance to the field today; second, a critical biography tracing the man’s development as a photographer and connecting his work, his teachings, his life, and his times; third, a reassessment, by practitioners, of his principles of craft, to determine their pertinence to contemporary photographic image making; fourth, the republication of the complete purist-pictorialist debate from *Camera Craft*, accompanied by analyses and discussions of the theories

9. Deborah Irmas, “Monsters and Madonnas,” *Photograph*, July 1977, 24.

10. A.D. Coleman, “Unrealities,” in *The Grotesque in Photography* (New York: Ridge Press, 1977), 148-207.

11. A.D. Coleman, “Unrealities,” in *The Grotesque in Photography* (New York: Ridge Press, 1977), 148.

and attitudes represented therein, reconsidered from a variety of standpoints; fifth, the republication of all of Mortensen's tutorial texts.¹²

In the postscript of the chapter, Coleman mentions a heated discussion that took place between himself and Beaumont Newhall (1908-1993) in which Newhall agreed to add Mortensen to the next edition of his history of photography "but only to dismiss him!"¹³ In a footnote to this quote Coleman recalls a conversation that occurred after the heated public discussion in which Newhall told Coleman that Adams' technical publications on the zone system were indebted to some degree to Mortensen.¹⁴ He states,

In conversation with me after the session broke up, Newhall told me that Adams's how-to books 'owed a debt to Mortensen that had never been acknowledged,' and suggested that I look into it. I put the thought aside until, in conversation with the researcher Matt Cook in Tucson, Arizona, November 1993, I learned that Adams's technical treatises, and the 'zone system' in particular, drew heavily on several articles published in *U.S. Camera Annual* in the 1940s, on the subjects of 'Constant Quality Prints' and 'Constant Quality Negatives.' The author of those articles was one John L. Davenport – who, in turn, apparently learned much from Mortensen.¹⁵

Irmas stepped up to Coleman's challenge to begin to resolve the injustices to Mortensen by assembling a retrospective entitled, *The Photographic Magic of William Mortensen*.¹⁶ The exhibition sponsored by The Los Angeles Center for Photographic Studies and funded in part by the National Endowment for the Arts, included 72

12. A.D. Coleman, "Conspicuous by His Absence: Concerning the Mysterious Disappearance of William Mortensen" in *Depth of Field: Essays on Photography, Mass Media, and Lens Culture* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico, 1978-1998), 91.

13. A.D. Coleman, "Conspicuous by his Absence: Concerning the Mysterious Disappearance of William Mortensen" in *Depth of Field: Essays on Photography, mass media, and lens culture* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1978-1998), 108.

14. A system of exposure and development to control the tonal range in black and white photographs devised by Ansel Adams in the late 1940s.

15. A.D. Coleman, "Conspicuous by his Absence: Concerning the Mysterious Disappearance of William Mortensen" in *Depth of Field: Essays on Photography, Mass Media, and Lens Culture* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1978-1998), 91.

16. Deborah Irmas, *The Photographic Magic of William Mortensen* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles Center for Photographic Studies, 1979), un-paginated.

Mortensen photographs. The catalog included a brief biography and an explanation of the Mortensen/Adams debate, an exhibition checklist, a list of articles that refer to Mortensen, lists of articles and books by Mortensen, and a brief chronology of his life.

Newhall kept his promise to Coleman and included a mention of Mortensen in the 1982 edition of *The History of Photography: From 1839 to the Present Day*. Newhall explains in the text how the f/64 group was a reaction to the pictorialist work being created. Newhall states,

betraying any handwork or avoidance of reality in choice of subject was 'impure.' It was a violent reaction to the weak, sentimental style then popular with pictorial photographers in California, as seen particularly in the anecdotal, highly sentimental, mildly erotic hand-colored prints of William Mortensen.¹⁷

There are two things interesting about Newhall's statement: first, he admits that the pictorial style was still popular; second, he indicates that California pictorialists had their own aesthetic.

Naomi Rosenblum takes a different approach to including Mortensen into the history of photography. She is more interested in Mortensen's use of collage and montage in his work. Similar to Coleman's book on the grotesque, Rosenblum discusses Mortensen's work along with the work of Jerry Uelsmann. As if she agrees with Irmas, Rosenblum places Mortensen in the chapter "Manipulations and Color" instead of with the pictorial photographers because his work does not fit the stereotype of pictorialist photography. She states,

Indeed, already in the early 1930s, printing multiple images on the same photographic support had enabled some American photographers to explore mystical realms that seemed impossible to evoke through straight photographs. At that time, William Mortensen, whose 'medieval

17. Beaumont Newhall, *The History of Photography: From 1839 to the Present Day* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1982), 188-192.

sensibility' led him to imagine scenes that seemed at once bizarre and amusing to many contemporaries, resorted to montage to create his visions of wickedness and lust.¹⁸

Jorge Lewinski better explains the popular “post-secessionist aesthetics” in *The Naked and the Nude: A History of the Nude in Photographs, 1839 to the Present*.¹⁹ He describes these images as “the Hollywood school of glamour photography” which is characterized by a lack of sharpness (not to be confused with being out of focus), retouching, and subject matter that is sentimental or moody.²⁰ Lewinski expresses that Mortensen was likely the most well-known and influential photographer of the movement. However, Lewinski ends his explanation of Mortensen by disregarding him when he says, “The unfortunate fact remains that Mortensen’s artificial style influenced amateur photography for a considerable time.”²¹

“The Manner of Mortensen: Aesthetic Communication and the Construction of Metaphysical Realities,” a thesis written by Edward Montgomery Clift, examines the photographs and writings of Mortensen using a combination of art history, sociology, anthropology and communications to study Mortensen’s work. The main focus of the thesis is the debate between the two opposing aesthetics. He uses Mortensen to represent the pictorialists and Adams to represent the purists. The main point of the paper is not really about Mortensen or Adams, Clift is using them as a way to analyze “aesthetic

18. Naomi Rosenblum, “Manipulations and Color” in *A World History of Photography* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1984), 565, 568.

19. Jorge Lewinski, *The Naked and the Nude: A History of the Nude in Photographs, 1839 to the Present* (New York: Harmony Books, 1987), 146.

20. Ibid., 119.

21. Ibid.

patterns and their construction of metaphysical realities.”²² As part of Clift’s approach he states,

the ethnographer is ethically required to examine a subject’s self-conscious constructions (i.e. writings) in addition to any primary output. Instead of applying a privileged viewpoint and drawing conclusions solely from the photographic work, statements and essays written by the research subjects are used to give a sense of what they thought of their aesthetic.²³

This statement is especially pertinent to this thesis because it is the exact approach that will be taken to examine Mortensen’s photographs of the female form.

In the introduction of the catalog for *After the Photo-Secession: American Pictorial Photography 1910-1955*, an exhibition produced by The Minneapolis Institute of Arts, Christian A. Peterson states, “Most published histories of photography either deny the existence of pictorialism after 1910 or consider the movement derivative and anemic. In truth, neither assessment is correct.”²⁴ He explains in the text that pictorialism was “populist” and that its practitioners adopted aspects of modernism and commercialism into their work. The resulting images were in sharper focus and reminiscent of advertising. He references Mortensen many times throughout the text as being representative of the pictorialists of the period following the Photo-Succession. He describes Mortensen as one of pictorialism’s “renegades” who focused his attention on photographs of the female nude despite the controversial nature of the subject.²⁵ Peterson states,

the conservative values of the pictorial movement were particularly evident in images of the female nude. Most pictorialists who photographed

22. Edward Montgomery Clift, “The Manner of Mortensen: Aesthetic Communication and the Construction of Metaphysical Realities” (master’s thesis, University of Pennsylvania, 1992), 105.

23. Edward Montgomery Clift, “The Manner of Mortensen: Aesthetic Communication and the Construction of Metaphysical Realities” (master’s thesis, University of Pennsylvania, 1992), 14.

24. Christian A. Peterson, *After the Photo-Secession: American Pictorial Photography 1910-1955* (New York: The Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 1997), 9.

25. Ibid., 114.

the nude worked within strict visual limits, dictated largely by the morals of the time. Those who wrote about this touchy subject compiled lists of things the respectable photographer should avoid.²⁶

Peterson indicates that photographers had several methods of maintaining “propriety in nude photography.”²⁷ The main method was to choose the appropriate model, a topic Mortensen stresses. The appropriate model was generally young with ideal proportions and the resulting photograph presented her as a universal type. To avoid the suggestion of indecency; things like underwear, luxurious surroundings and smiles with direct eye contact were avoided. Mortensen follows most of these rules, but likely the reason Peterson still characterizes him as a renegade is related to the fact that much of his work is highly sexually suggestive.

The most comprehensive writing about William Mortensen was produced by the Center for Creative Photography, using the materials from the Mortensen archive. *William Mortensen: A revival* consists of three articles, a chronology of his life and a bibliography of his various publications.²⁸ The article by Michael Dawson, “William Mortensen: Gothic Modernist,” outlines the career of Mortensen from his roots in Utah, to his career in Hollywood and his development of a school in Laguna Beach. Dawson also summarizes aspects of Mortensen’s theories as they apply to his multi-part article, “Venus and Vulcan,” published in *Camera Craft* from March to July of 1934, as well as his texts: *Monsters & Madonnas* and *The Command to Look*. Dawson explains how the articles that comprise the “Venus and Vulcan” series include very complex philosophies,

26. Christian A. Peterson, *After the Photo-Secession: American Pictorial Photography 1910-1955* (New York: The Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 1997), 111-12.

27. Ibid., 112.

28. A.D. Coleman, Michael Dawson, Diane Dillon, Larry Lytle, Amy Rule, *William Mortensen: A revival* (Tucson: Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, 1998).

but he feels that by the publication of *The Command to Look* Mortensen has simplified his theories. Dawson does not directly explain how these texts apply to Mortensen's actual photographs. However, in the second article, Diane Dillon makes the comparison between Mortensen's photographs and texts in "William Mortensen and George Dunham: Photography as Collaboration," which uses queer theory to scrutinize the relationship between Dunham and Mortensen by examining Mortensen's texts and photographs. Dillon suggests that in addition to being one of Mortensen's main models, Dunham also served as a ghostwriter for Mortensen's monographs and publications.²⁹ Ultimately, what Dillon is implying is that Mortensen was secretly homosexual and that he used his professional relationship as a substitute for the intimate relationship he and Dunham desired. Dillon's argument is suggestion at best and could easily be disputed using many of the same references. The final article in the publication, "Beyond Recall: In the William Mortensen Archive," presents A.D. Coleman's summary of the archive experience as it applies to the various fonds that encompass the Mortensen archive. He also criticizes Ansel Adams and Nancy and Beaumont Newhall for their purposeful exclusion of Mortensen in the history of photography, an argument he has made in previous publications. One of the last two sections of the publication includes "A Selected Chronological Bibliography," by Larry Lytle and Michael Dawson that highlights and summarizes the major publications produced during Mortensen's lifetime, which has served as a guide for insuring the major works of Mortensen are considered for this analysis. The last entry by Amy Rule, with contributions from Larry Lytle, is a

29. Dillon presents Dunham as Mortensen's ghostwriter as a theory but the dust jacket of the third edition of *How to Pose the Model* confirms that Dunham co-wrote Mortensen's nine books, various brochures and magazine articles. See William Mortensen and George Dunham, *How to Pose the Model: A book on the problems of posing the model* (San Francisco: Camera Craft Publishing Company, 1956).

chronology of Mortensen's life associated with events of both cultural and photographic significance.

In 2000, the Musée de l'Élysée presented the exhibition, *The Century of the Body: 100 Photoworks, 1900-2000*.³⁰ The exhibition catalog that accompanied the exhibit included a sample of artists and works from the show. Mortensen's *Mutual Admiration*, a photograph of a nude woman on her tip toes leaning up to kiss a peacock, was accompanied by an explanation of who Mortensen was and a description of the photograph. The catalog recognizes Mortensen as an important figure whose work is greatly influenced by his association with Arthur Kales, "The Bromoil King," and Cecil B. De Mille, a Hollywood director for whom Mortensen shot photographic stills.³¹

In addition to his work with the Center for Creative Photography on *William Mortensen: a revival*, Larry Lytle has also published a three part online article, "The Command to Look: The Story of William Mortensen." Part one of the article contains a brief biography of the life of William Mortensen and information about his obscurity in the history of photography. Lytle concludes part one stating, "Undeniably Mortensen has

30. William A. Ewing, ed., *The Century of the Body: 100 photoworks, 1900-2000* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2000).

31. Robert Balcomb, artist and student of Mortensen, expounds on the role of Arthur Kales in Mortensen's life, "One day in Los Angeles, as Mortensen was carrying his bulky equipment through Griffith Park, he met another photographer taking pictures of a model and stopped to watch. The man was Arthur Kales...Kales asked Mortensen to leave, but then called him back...they spent the rest of the day discussing photography and ended up at a photo store, exchanging Mortensen's equipment for some that Kales advised was better. It was the beginning of a life-long friendship. Kales worked exclusively with bromoils and was a master with the process. He taught Mortensen so well that he, too, became a master with it. In fact, years later, after a long and costly period of intensive experimenting, Mortensen simplified the laborious, time-consuming bromoil process to devise his own 'Pigment Process.'" Robert Balcomb, "Mortensen: Artist with a Camera" (Unpublished Manuscript: Center for Creative Photography, ca 1974), 6 & 7. In the book *The Century of the Body: 100 photoworks, 1900-2000*, they credit the trademarks of "moral instruction and theatricality, leavened by sexual titillation" found in Mortensen's work to his connection with Cecil B. De Mille and Arthur Kales. William A. Ewing, ed., *The Century of the Body: 100 photoworks, 1900-2000* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2000), 102-3.

earned his place in the history of photography.”³² Part two of the article contains aspects of Mortensen’s biography as it pertains to his education and practice of art. The main focus, however, seems to be the placement of Mortensen within history as an important artist. According to Lytle, “we must look at his work in terms of its use of painting/drawing, etching, photography, movie making, art history, and polemics to create a type of hybrid not seen until the 1960’s with artists such as Andy Warhol.”³³ Once again someone is suggesting that Mortensen’s work be examined outside the context of pictorialism. In the final installment of the article Lytle focuses on George Dunham and examines the collaborative nature of Dunham’s relationship with Mortensen. In Lytle’s opinion, the relationship must have been mutually beneficial or Dunham would not have worked with Mortensen as long as he did.

The three main themes written about Mortensen include: 1) the Mortensen/Adams debate; 2) Mortensen’s lack of representation in the history of photography; and 3) defining Mortensen as something other than a pictorialist. What is lacking is any comprehensive information pertaining to Mortensen’s photographs or writing.

32. Larry Lytle, “The Command to Look: The Story of William Mortensen, Part I.” *The Scream Online*, (June, 2001), <http://thescreamonline.com/photo/photo06-01/mortensen/commandtolook1.html>. (accessed January 28, 2010).

33. Lytle, Larry. “The Command to Look: The story of William Mortensen, Part I.” *The Scream Online*, (August, 2001), <http://thescreamonline.com/photo/photo06-01/mortensen/commandtolook1.html>. (accessed January 28, 2010).

BIOGRAPHY AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The main focus of the pictorialist movement was to establish photography as an accepted art. The exact origin of the movement is unclear but it began around the end of the nineteenth century. According to Alison Nordström and David Wooters, authors of “Crafting the Art of the Photograph” in the exhibition catalog *Truth Beauty: Pictorialism and the Photograph as Art, 1845-1945*, “photographic pictorialism was simultaneously a movement, a philosophy, an aesthetic and a style.”³⁴ The two key figures involved in the beginnings of pictorialism were Henry Peach Robinson (1830-1901) and Peter Henry Emerson (1856-1936). Robinson encouraged photographers to study academic painting and often pieced his images together using several different negatives to create well thought out compositions. In contrast Emerson encouraged the study of nature and a focus on photography’s inherent characteristics. During the early years of pictorialism, large format cameras were used for photographing and prints were produced by contact printing the negative with the photographic paper. The period is most characterized by photographs that are soft focus, prints produced using printmaking techniques, and ultimately expressive photographic imagery.

In 1902 Alfred Steiglitz founded the Photo-Secession and became the leader of the American pictorialist movement. Steiglitz differed from the previous pictorialists in that he encouraged the use of the hand camera for pictorial photography and made most of his photographs through enlargement and cropping.

William Herbert Mortensen was born during the pictorialist era and just prior to the founding of the Photo-Secession on, January 27, 1897 in Park City, Utah. He was

34. Thomas Padon, ed., *Truth Beauty: Pictorialism and the Photograph as Art, 1845-1945* (Vancouver: Vancouver Art Gallery; Douglas & McIntyre, 2008), 33.

enthusiastic about art from a young age and received his first camera at the age of ten. He also enjoyed painting and drawing and began taking painting lessons when the Mortensen family moved to Salt Lake City, Utah.

Mortensen joined the U.S. Army in 1917, which is the same year that Stieglitz ended the publication of *Camera Work* and is considered to be by some historians, the year that pictorialism ended.³⁵ Mortensen was discharged from the Army the following year and moved to New York City where he took classes at the Art Students' League. In 1920, after being informed that he had "no talent for drawing" he made his way to Greece where he painted poster designs. Later that year, after running out of money, he returned to Salt Lake City where he took a job as an art teacher at East Side High School, the same high school from which he had graduated. It was during this time he began to experiment again with photography, he states "becoming increasingly conscious of my limitations as a draughtsman, I began experiments with photography... my first models were girls from my classes, who posed for me after school hours."³⁶ The Dean of Women found out about Mortensen's use of his female students, which lead to Mortensen leaving his position with the school at the end of the year.

In the fall of 1921 he moved to Los Angeles, California and by the mid-1920s opened his first photography studio. Despite the dissolution of the Photo-Secession, many photographers were still practicing what they considered to be pictorialism; however, the

35. Despite the fact that most history of photography texts would have us believe that pictorialism ended after the Photo-Succession disbanded, the truth is that many camera clubs practiced pictorialism well into the late part of the twentieth century. This misinformation provided by authors such as Beaumont Newhall has lead A.D. Coleman to believe that Mortensen was purposefully omitted from the histories despite his popularity during his lifetime.

36. William Mortensen, *The Command to Look: A Formula for Picture Success* (San Francisco: Camera Craft Publishing, 1937), 9.

influences of Hollywood, industrialization, and commercialism affected the imagery.

Rosenblum best describes this post-secession aesthetic,

A distinguishing feature of the photography of the 1920s was the emergence of a wide variety of techniques, styles, and approaches, all displaying unusual vigor. Responding to greater economic opportunities in the medium and involved in the intense intellectual, political, and cultural ferment that followed the first World War, many photographers became conscious of the effects of technology, urbanization, cinema, and graphic art on camera expression....the aesthetic concepts associated with Constructivism, Dadaism, and Surrealism inspired a climate of experimentation, with photo-collage, montage, cameraless images, nonobjective forms, unusual angles, and extreme close-ups marking the photographic expression of the era.³⁷



Fig. 1. Mortensen. SALOME, ca. 1930.

During his time in California Mortensen worked on several Hollywood projects assisting with costumes and masks as well as taking photographs. He photographed many Hollywood stars including Jean Harlow and Rudolph Valentino. According to Mortensen, “this was the time of the exploitation of the ‘cutie.’ Certainly

37. Naomi Rosenblum, “Art, Photography, and Modernism 1920-1945” in *A World History of Photography* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1984), 393.

never before in history had so many and such varied examples of feminine pulchritude been gathered together in a single place.”³⁸

In 1926, Mortensen began working as the still photographer for Cecil B. DeMille’s film *The King of Kings*. He also began showing his photographs in the salons, and in 1928 *Salome* was accepted in the London Salon. Mortensen left Hollywood in 1931 to escape what he expressed as “the depression, the talkies, growing dissatisfaction, and possibly a tardy arrival at maturity,” and moved to Laguna Beach. In 1932, the same year the f/64 Group was founded (the group promoted straight photography using large format cameras and small apertures), Mortensen founded the Mortensen School of Photography (the school was intended to expand the photographic and artistic knowledge of the students so they could learn how to make good pictures – not necessarily to create the types of pictures Mortensen made). The Group f/64 originally consisted of Edward Weston (1886-1958), Ansel Adams (1902-1984), Imogen Cunningham (1883-1976), Willard Van Dyke (1906-1986), Sonya Noskowiak (1900-1975), Henry Swift (1823-1969), and John Paul Edwards (1884-1968). Shortly after being founded they added Dorothea Lange (1894-1986), William Simpson (unknown dates), and Peter Stackpole (1913-1997) to the group. The group would eventually become the antithesis of everything Mortensen believed and Mortensen would ultimately become the enemy of Ansel Adams, a founding member of the group.

In 1933, Mortensen met and married Myrdith Monogham and met George Dunham, the two people who would be most influential in his life. George and Myrdith are two of Mortensen’s most frequent models; they also assisted Mortensen with running

38. William Mortensen, *The Command to Look: A Formula for Picture Success* (San Francisco: Camera Craft Publishing, 1937), 10.

the school. In addition, Dunham functioned as a research assistant and ghost writer/co-author of Mortensen's articles, books, and pamphlets.

In 1934 a series of articles appeared in *Camera Craft* written by the very popular Mortensen and the then relatively unknown Ansel Adams. The articles argued the opposing viewpoints of the purist and pictorialist aesthetics. In an article outlining the Group f/64 ideologies written by John Paul Edwards for *Camera Craft* in March of 1935, he states, "the purpose of Group f/64 is not militant. It has no controversy with the photographic pictorialist."³⁹ A fact that seems untrue after reading the exchanges between Mortensen and Adams. According to Edward Montgomery Clift, Mortensen's popularity is what kept *Camera Craft* in business. He states, "advertisements for Mortensen's school, in addition to revenues from the publications of his books, were essential to the financial survival of *Camera Craft* through the thirties. In this way, Mortensen literally supported the forum of the aesthetic debate in which he engaged Adams."⁴⁰

Mortensen and the Mortensen School of Photography remained popular despite the growing support for the Group f/64. As the number of Mortensen's articles appearing in *Camera Craft* decreased, the number of articles appearing in magazines like *Popular Photography* and *International Photographer* increased. The articles that appeared in the later years of Mortensen's career increasingly catered to the amateur photographer, illustrating his efforts to remain popular. By the mid-1960s Mortensen gave up photography and concentrated on painting. Mortensen died in 1965 of leukemia.⁴¹

39. John Paul Edwards, "Group F:64," *Camera Craft* (March 1935): 107.

40. Edward Montgomery Clift, "The Manner of Mortensen: Aesthetic Communication and the Construction of Metaphysical Realities" (master's thesis, University of Pennsylvania, 1992), 4.

41. The biography and historical context was compiled from the following sources: William Mortensen, *The Command to Look: A Formula for Picture Success* (San Francisco: Camera Craft Publishing, 1937); Beaumont Newhall, *The History of Photography: From 1839 to the Present Day* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1964); Robert Balcomb, "Mortensen: Artist with a Camera" (Unpublished Manuscript: Center

The Mortensen archive is housed at the Center for Creative Photography in Tucson, Arizona. The Center was established in 1957 to house the archive of five artists: Ansel Adams (1902-1984), Wynn Bullock (1902-1975), Harry Callahan (1912-1999), Aaron Siskind (1903-1991), and Frederick Sommer (1905-1999). The Center houses approximately 50 archives of twentieth century American photographers. The Mortensen archive includes various prints and portfolios, biographical information, personal and business papers, as well as posthumous material from his widow, Myrdith Mortensen. Other related archives include the Mortensen/Dunham collection, which was acquired from the Dunham estate, as well as several collections from past students of Mortensen including Robert Balcomb, Fritz Kaeser, and Grey Silva.⁴²

for Creative Photography, ca 1974); Naomi Rosenblum, *A World History of Photography* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1984); Edward Montgomery Clift, "The Manner of Mortensen: Aesthetic Communication and the Construction of Metaphysical Realities" (master's thesis, University of Pennsylvania, 1992); A.D. Coleman, et al., "William Mortensen Chronology with Related Cultural and Photographic Events" in *William Mortensen: A revival* (Tucson: Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, 1998); Michel Frizot, ed., *A New History of Photography* (Köln: Könemann, 1998); and Mary Warner Marien, *Photography: a cultural history* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2002).

42. Information on the Mortensen archive compiled from Center for Creative Photography, "History," Center for Creative Photography, <http://www.creativephotography.org/information/history.php> (accessed August 15, 2010), and *Original Sources: Art and Archives at the Center for Creative Photography* (2002) edited by Amy Rule and Nancy Solomon.

THE LOOK OF WILLIAM MORTENSEN'S PHOTOGRAPHS

Mortensen's finished photographs look a lot like images made by drawing or mechanical means. He achieves this look in several ways: 1) lighting, 2) negative exposure and developing, 3) printing methods, 4) texture screens and 5) abrasion toning.

Mortensen's goals in lighting are: "1. To produce a two-dimensional effect. 2. To secure modeling without use of cast shadows. 3. To keep within the photographic range of luminosity. 4. To give full scope to the photographic range of half tones. 5. To present the image in the simplest, most direct manner possible."¹ All of Mortensen's lighting setups begin as the *Basic Light*. The *Basic Light* involves the use of two fixed lights (one used for the background and one for lighting the subject), each type of lighting effect is accomplished by adjusting the placement of the lights in relation to the subject and the background.² The types of studio lighting one can achieve from the *Basic Light* include: *Contour Light*, *Semi-Silhouette Light*, *Dynamic Light* and *Plastic Light*. These lighting setups are predominately done in the studio, however, with some greater difficulty the same results can be obtained in the outdoors.

The types of light associated with the nude are: *Basic Light* for "nudes of an idealistic sort," *Contour Light* for profiles and nudes and *Plastic Light* for "sculpturesque" nudes.³ The *Basic Light* setup illuminates the subject and background evenly as can be seen in *Youth*. Mortensen explains that "the Basic Light is pre-eminently a form revealing light...[emphasizing] the static, impersonal, timeless aspects of the subject."⁴ To accomplish the *Contour Light* the camera is pulled a few feet back from the

1. William Mortensen, *Pictorial Lighting* (San Francisco: Camera Craft Publishing Company, 1935), 30.

2. See Appendix A for examples of types of lighting.

3. William Mortensen, *Pictorial Lighting* (San Francisco: Camera Craft Publishing Company, 1935), 73.

4. *Ibid.*, 36.

subject light and the subject light is moved to one side in order for the lamp not to appear in the photograph. The result should be a subject and background evenly illuminated with a “narrow outline of shadow.”⁵ The *Plastic Light* is significantly different than the *Basic Light* or *Contour Light*. In this setup the subject light is placed close to the subject and is angled towards the subject from below. According to Mortensen, “this light is particularly suitable to nudes in which the emphasis is not on contour or line but on plastic masses.”⁶ The background light is angled downward. This results in a photograph where the “background is intermediate in tone between the light-area and the shadow area of the subject.”⁷ This is not to say that Mortensen would limit himself to these arrangements, but they are what he recommends for the subject matter.

Mortensen suggests in his text *Pictorial Lighting* that photographs should contain a combination of the tonal gradations *chiaroscuro* and *notan*.⁸ According to Mortensen, *chiaroscuro* (which refers to the use of light and shade to create roundness and mass in fine art paintings) requires a tonal range beyond that which photography can produce. He explains, “notan presents the thing itself while chiaroscuro presents the effect produced upon it by light.”⁹ *Notan* should be considered as the representation of something as two-dimensional while the use of *chiaroscuro* is used to create the illusion of three-dimensionality. Mortensen is suggesting that photographs should combine these concepts

5. William Mortensen, *Pictorial Lighting* (San Francisco: Camera Craft Publishing Company, 1935), 71.

6. *Ibid.*, 67.

7. *Ibid.*, 72.

8. “The term NOTAN, a Japanese word meaning ‘dark, light’, refers to the quantity of light reflected, or the massing of tones of different values. Notan-beauty means the harmony resulting from the combination of dark and light spaces – whether colored or not – whether in buildings, in pictures, or in nature.” (pg. 7) “The Orientals rarely represent shadow; they seem to regard them as of slight interest – mere fleeting effects or accidents. They prefer to model by line rather than by shading. They recognize Notan as a vital and distinct element of the art of painting.” Arthur Wesley Dow, *Composition: Understanding Line, Notan and Color* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 2007), 53.

9. William Mortensen, *Pictorial Lighting* (San Francisco: Camera Craft Publishing Company, 1935), 18, 20.

to create an image that lacks the contrast of *chiaroscuro* and relies on the tonal qualities of *notan*. The desired result is obtained through lighting as well as through the exposure and developing of the negative.

Mortensen's book, *Mortensen on the Negative*, explains that there are nine variations of exposure of film to development time. General photographic training suggests that you expose for the shadows, but as Mortensen stated in *Projection Control* he likes to "expose for the light area and let the shadows take care of themselves."¹⁰ Of the nine types of negatives Mortensen discusses, he focuses intently on negatives three and seven. His explanation of the two types of negatives is as follows,

3. Overexposed and underdeveloped. Translucent light area with the shadow area only slightly paler. Close relationship of light and shadow areas, but poor separation of half-tones in the light area. No blacks anywhere in negative.

7. Underexposed and overdeveloped. Maximum separation of half-tones in the light area, with slight but not satisfactory drawing in the shadow area.¹¹

Negative three is intended for use by beginning photographers and commercial work because it is easy to obtain. Mortensen recommends negative seven (or a variation of it) for pictorial and portrait work because of "its peculiar and characteristic rendering of light and dark half-tones in the subject."¹² Ultimately, negative seven is used to obtain the compromise between *notan* and *chiaroscuro*.

For Mortensen, the photograph taken in the camera is just the starting point in the creation of a picture. He has four methods of printing (Mortensen refers to these methods as "projection control") he uses in creating a photograph: framing, local printing

10. William Mortensen, *Projection Control* (San Francisco: Camera Craft Publishing Company, 1934), 10.

11. William Mortensen, *Mortensen on the Negative* (New York: Simon & Schuster Inc., 1940), 156.

12. William Mortensen, *Projection Control* (San Francisco: Camera Craft Publishing Company, 1934), 167.

(dodging in), alteration or distortion and combination or montage. Mortensen explains framing as, “the problem of fitting the subject within the border and determining the most effective placing of the principal and subordinate points of interest.”¹³ Basically, framing is the equivalent to understanding basic rules of composition. Local Printing is a process by which the photographer places an opaque object (such as a piece of cardboard) with a hole in it between the printing frame and the enlarger. Using the hole like a drawing instrument, the photographer can control the light. One of the reasons Mortensen’s photographs appear similar to drawings is because he is using the light to draw in the areas of the photograph that he wants to emphasize. In order to “escape further...from the literal, realistic conditions of the negative,” Mortensen uses the method of distortion.¹⁴ Most often



Fig. 2. Mortensen. OBSESSION, ca. 1930.

this distortion appears in the form of elongation, which is used to manipulate, for example, the face in a portrait or the body of a nude. In order to create this effect Mortensen tilts the printing frame toward the enlarger and makes the exposure.

13. William Mortensen, *Projection Control* (San Francisco: Camera Craft Publishing Company, 1934), 15.

14. William Mortensen, *Projection Control* (San Francisco: Camera Craft Publishing Company, 1934), 21.

Mortensen's *Obsession* is an example of the technique of elongation. Mortensen associates montage as a technique developed for motion picture but finds it applicable to the creation of photographs.¹⁵ He makes the distinction that "montage is a matter of combination printing; but not all combination printing is montage."¹⁶ Montage is the construction of an idea created through the juxtaposition of photographic elements that have no "overtone of an idea" on their own; and combination printing is simply the combination of pictorial elements that do not necessarily convey an idea.¹⁷ Ultimately, the combination of these techniques comprises the foundation for Mortensen's creative production.

Mortensen uses texture screens on many of his prints to give the photograph uniformity as well as to make it appear less mechanical. A texture screen "consists of an impediment (usually a patterned film negative, rarely an actual fabric) which is placed in contact with the paper in making a projection print. The pattern or texture of the screen becomes incorporated with the photographic image, and if the screen is well designed, and properly adjusted and scaled to the image, it somewhat relaxes the mechanical tightness of the photographic rendering."¹⁸ The texture pattern for the texture screen can be obtained from an object with an inherent texture like fabric or specialty papers or can be created by drawing a pattern oneself. The texture is then contact printed with a negative, thus turning the pattern into a negative that can be used when making a print. Mortensen cautions that the intent of the texture screen is not an attempt to make the

15. William Mortensen, *Projection Control* (San Francisco: Camera Craft Publishing Company, 1934), 26.

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid.

18. William Mortensen, *Mortensen System: The Texture Screen* (Newport Beach: Jay Curtis Publications, 1954), 12.

picture less photographic but is “an effort to recover something of the non-mechanical vision of the artist who made the drawing.”¹⁹

The final type of manipulation Mortensen can apply on the resulting final print is through a process known as the Abrasion-Tone Process. The Abrasion-Tone Process is used to eliminate flaws, create more dramatic effect, and to adjust tones and details.

According to Mortensen,

the process seeks, fundamentally, to do three things: 1. To obtain pure white in the extreme highlights of the print (and nowhere else). This is something practically impossible to obtain by purely photographic methods. 2. To secure an additional range of half-tones in the light-area. This enables you to give increased pictorial value to that part of the picture which is of most interest psychologically. You look first, and with most pleasure, at the lighter areas of the picture; hence there should be the fullest possible rendering of half-tones within these areas. 3. To eliminate or modify undesirable pictorial elements. The process makes possible certain eliminations that cannot be accomplished by any other method.²⁰

The Abrasion-Tone Process is not intended to make any large adjustments to the print and cannot fix errors made during printing or posing.

The combination of Mortensen’s various lighting, printing, and handwork techniques result in images that lack the contrast generally seen in modern day photographs. The pictures have an illustrative quality that alludes to the artist’s hand during the production. At first glance they may even appear to be drawings or lithographs but there still remains an aspect of the mechanical realism that can only come from the camera.

19. William Mortensen, *Mortensen System: The Texture Screen* (Newport Beach: Jay Curtis Publications, 1954), 12.

20. William Mortensen, “Abrasion Tone for Pictorial Effect,” *Popular Photography* (October, 1938).

THE MODEL

*An expressive element...not important for what he or she is, but for what he or she says through the medium of the picture.**

The model is the point from which the picture begins, according to Mortensen, “more than any other of the graphic arts, photography is dependent on the presence of the model...it is not possible in the model’s absence, as in the other arts, to work up the finished picture from the preliminary sketches.”¹ The nude as a subject is important to photography, according to Mortensen, because

to the graphic arts the nude human body affords an unending series of plastic problems of composition and design. For photography the nude is particularly apt material. It offers a subject of great plastic variety and of nearly uniform color. It thus affords, when properly illuminated, an infinite variety of half-tones unspoiled by harsh contrasts. Such a subject is, of course, perfectly adapted to the peculiar limitations of the photographic medium.²

The nude female figure is perfect for pictorial photography because it is “a form at once abstract and personal, combining in one symbol the impulses of the flesh and of the spirit.”³ As a subject it is timeless and universal – both qualities that Mortensen feels are imperative in a good picture.

In the book *The Command to Look*, Mortensen outlines his formula for picture success as: “(1) The picture must, by its mere arrangement, make you look at it. (2) Having looked – see! (3) Having seen – enjoy.”⁴ Robert Balcomb explains the formula in

* William Mortensen, *The Model: A Book on the Problems of Posing* (San Francisco: Camera Craft Publishing, 1937), 173.

1. Ibid., 15.

2. Ibid., 73.

3. William Mortensen, *Mortensen System: The Female Figure* (Newport Beach: Jay Curtis Publications, 1954), 8.

4. William Mortensen, *The Command to Look: A Formula for Picture Success* (San Francisco: Camera Craft Publishing 1937), 20.

terms of impact, subject interest, and enjoyment.⁵ According to Balcomb, “Before we see the picture itself, we are initially stopped by the impact - - that which we ‘see’ (or better expressed, ‘feel’) before any conscious recognition of subject matter takes place.” The impact is caused by four basic compositions: the diagonal, the s-curve, the triangle, and the dominant mass.⁶ Mortensen’s “Having looked – see!” is defined by Balcomb as subject interest. Mortensen focuses on producing subject interest using what he considers are the three basic (universal) human emotions: “Sex, Sentiment, and Wonder.”⁷

According to Mortensen,

Of the three sex is undoubtedly the most primitive and direct in its appeal. It covers a wide scope, running into outright pornography on one hand, and shading imperceptibly into sentiment on the other. The nude of course, is the subject material that is commonly associated with the theme of sex. The fact of nudity is secondary, however. A picture may be sexual in its import without including the nude. On the other hand, sex is not always the primary interest when the nude is used.... It is interesting to note that women are just as much attracted to the theme of sex when presented in the form of the feminine nude as men are. Their attraction in this case is vicarious, rather than direct. Their pleasure comes from imagining themselves placed in a situation where they would receive the same admiration that goes out to the theme of the picture. Therefore, the attraction of the sex theme (excepting only its directly pornographic use)

5. Robert Balcomb, “Mortensen: Artist with a Camera” (Unpublished Manuscript: Center for Creative Photography, ca 1974), unpaginated.

6. Mortensen refers to the S-Curve as being “the Line of Beauty of Hogarth.” William Mortensen, *The Command to Look: A Formula for Picture Success* (San Francisco: Camera Craft Publishing, 1937), 106. “In 1745, Hogarth published a frontispiece to his engraved works, in which he drew a serpentine line lying on a painter's pallet, and placed under it the words, The Line of Beauty. It immediately gave rise to considerable discussion and in response to the frequent requests for an explanation, Hogarth wrote and published *The Analysis of Beauty*.” William Hogarth, *The Analysis of Beauty: A Reprint* (Chicago: The Reilly & Lee Company, 1908), 7-8. Hogarth explains, “That the waving line, or line of beauty, varying still more, being composed of two curves contrasted, becomes still more ornamental and pleasing, inasmuch that the hand takes a lively movement in making it with pen or pencil. And that the serpentine line, by its waving and winding at the same time different ways, leads the eye in a pleasing manner along the continuity of its variety, if I may be allowed the expression; and which, though but a single line, by its twisting so many different ways, may be said to enclose varied contents; and therefore all its variety cannot be expressed on paper by one continued line, without the assistance of the imagination, or the help of a figure.” William Hogarth, *The Analysis of Beauty: A Reprint* (Chicago: The Reilly & Lee Company, 1908), 73, 75.

7. William Mortensen, *The Command to Look: A Formula for Picture Success* (San Francisco: Camera Craft Publishing 1937), 35-36.

is in no way limited by the gender of the looker. It is probably no longer necessary, as it was in pre-War days, to explain and justify the use of the sex motive in pictorial art. Psychologists have recognized sex as a great energizing influence in life. As such, it is bound to play a large part, directly or indirectly, in all forms of art.⁸

Sex and the nude are universal themes, which can be personal enough for a viewer to relate with and impersonal enough to speak to a wide audience. The fact that Mortensen often uses the element of sex as his main subject matter in his pictorial photographs shows a certain reliance on it to maintain the attention of potential viewers.

The final rule in the formula relates to enjoyment of the image, which likely occurs when the viewer is able to experience empathy. Mortensen explains this experience,

In looking at a picture, or any other works of art, we are all apt – if we have any imagination – to project ourselves into the work of art, to identify ourselves with what is going on in it. This feeling of self-identification may be sufficiently strong to create an actual physical sensation...This ‘feeling oneself into the picture,’ this momentary identification of oneself with the subject, is what is known as empathy.⁹

Empathy is a key concept in understanding Mortensen’s work. It influences his choice in subject, pose, and composition. In *The Model: A Book on the Problems of Posing*, Mortensen breaks the body up into categories: the head and face; shoulders, arms and hands; the torso; and the legs and feet. He warns, “The human body is a structure – a relationship of parts. The best posing of the body is that which best and most clearly expresses this structure, the relationship of parts, and their articulations.”¹⁰ With all aspects of the body it is important that the model appears to be comfortable in a

8. William Mortensen, *The Command to Look: A Formula for Picture Success* (San Francisco: Camera Craft Publishing, 1937), 37-38.

9. William Mortensen, “Portrait of a Young Girl,” Chap. Nudes in *Monsters and Madonnas* (San Francisco: Camera Craft Publishing, 1936), unpaginated.

10. William Mortensen, *The Model: A Book on the Problems of Posing* (San Francisco: Camera Craft Publishing, 1937), 24.

somewhat natural position. Mortensen believes that one of the elements that makes a picture successful or unsuccessful is empathy. If the model's positioning appears uncomfortable to the viewer then the viewer may feel uncomfortable looking at the picture.

Mortensen created photographs during his lifetime that fall into three self-defined categories: Characters, Nudes, and Grotesques.¹¹ His Characters are generally portraits, but the portraits represent a "recognizable universal type rather than an individual."¹² Examples which will be examined in this thesis include: *The Moroccan Maid*, *The New Race*, *Salome*, *Café Dancer – Stamboul*, *A Siren of the South Seas*, *A Romany Maid*, *Study of a Young Girl*, *Bast*, *Woman of Languedoc* and *Woman of Arles*.

The category of the Nude is self-explanatory. However, photographs of the nude figure can be broken up into types: the athletic nude, the romantic nude, the provocative nude and the decorative nude. Mortensen briefly describes the four types in *Mortensen System: The Female Figure*:

1. THE ATHLETIC NUDE.

Health and activity are the key aspects of this presentation of the figure. It demands the natural setting and the freedom of the outdoors. False and excessive exuberance results if you try to represent this type in an indoor setting. But in the outdoor spaces, in the brilliance of full sunlight, you can show the figure in vigorous action – walking, running or leaping – expressing the vitality that inheres in a clean and healthy body.

2. THE ROMANTIC NUDE.

The figure here is involved in some slight episode. The picture is of the story-telling type, though the 'story' is seldom elaborate or very specific. Occasionally it may allude directly to some familiar story or character, but

11. William Mortensen, *Monsters & Madonnas* (San Francisco: Camera Craft Publishing, 1936).

12. William Mortensen, "Thunder" Chap. Characters in *Monsters & Madonnas* (San Francisco: Camera Craft Publishing, 1936), unpaginated.

it usually is only a matter of by-play with some significant ‘property’ or attribute.

3. THE PROVOCATIVE NUDE.

Here we have to do more directly with the sex element. But this by no means implies a hot and sultry treatment. Sex may be represented as entertainment rather than obsession, as something cool and clear rather than turbid or troubled.

4. THE DECORATIVE NUDE.

Here the figure is regarded in terms of decoration: it becomes merely a means for filling a given space with effective lines and masses. Sometimes just a portion of the body, a fragment, is sufficient to create a decorative pattern. But these ‘fragments’ must be structurally coherent, like fragments of sculpture. Lately we have seen some so-called ‘fragments’ that were not fragments at all, but cuts of meat – rib steak, breast of lamb, rump roast.¹³

Of course, not all models are suited to being used for photography of the nude.

Mortensen prefers young attractive models for photographs of the nude. Mortensen states, “the principle qualification is the physical...the figure must be good and the carriage graceful.”¹⁴ As mentioned previously, young attractive models were often used in nude pictorial photography because a respectable subject was more morally acceptable.

According to Christian A. Peterson,

Very young women were usually used because of their slender bodies and wholesome exuberance. Photographic models had to be ideal in natural form...since pictorialists could not alter their images to the extent that painters and sculptors could.¹⁵

In order to maintain photographs with acceptable moral decency Mortensen preferred that the model have certain kinds of breasts, avoid smiling, and should lack pubic hair. He

13. William Mortensen, *Mortensen System: The Female Figure* (Newport Beach: Jay Curtis Publications, 1954), 8.

14. William Mortensen, *The Model: A Book on the Problems of Posing* (San Francisco: Camera Craft Publishing, 1937), 207.

15. Christian A. Peterson, *After the Photo-Secession: American Pictorial Photography 1910-1955* (New York: The Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 1997), 112.

lists three types of breasts suitable for pictorial work: the “pear shaped” breast, which he finds most typical of the Japanese and Chinese; the breast characteristic of Western Europe, which is exemplified by its flat or concave upper surface and nipple above the center of the breast; and the American breast described as “small, flat and compact, and generally accompanies a spare, athletic figure.”¹⁶ Mortensen refers to smiling as a “monotonous fixity.”¹⁷ In addition to his interest in maintaining acceptable nude pictorial photographs, Mortensen’s awareness of art history and his hatred of snapshot photography play a role in why he does not like the model to smile. It also brings a personal element to the photograph, which he believes should be avoided in art photography. Smiles do appear in some of Mortensen’s work, however, he warns that the smile should be controlled and used sparingly. Mortensen’s thoughts on pubic hair are as follows,

the old Post-Office regulation solved the problem in its own manner by arbitrarily branding pictures in which the pubic hair was apparent as ‘obscene’, and by barring them from the mails. From the point of view of the pictorialist, the problem is not so simply solved. Fundamental issues of taste are involved. Indeed, good taste is the only thing that will solve this problem. A sense of what is fitting and appropriate will dictate the choice between removal or retention. Personally, I feel that in the case of nudes photographed indoors with emphasis on structure and plastic quality, the removal of the pubic hair is definitely indicated. Its retention creates a crass realistic note quite out of key with the subject matter and its manner of presentation.¹⁸

In images where the model is shaven, Mortensen further manipulates the image to eliminate any existing details that would imply the female genitals. If the nude is shot outdoors in a more natural environment Mortensen feels that the removal of the hair is

16. William Mortensen, *The Model: A Book on the Problems of Posing* (San Francisco: Camera Craft Publishing, 1937), 70.

17. Ibid., 40.

18. Ibid., 73.

more noticeable and out of place. Mortensen also finds things such as bathing suit marks and the dirty soles of feet inappropriate for pictorial photography. His avoidance of these elements is also related to creating a separation between decent and indecent nude photographs, because dirty feet and bathing suit marks serve as reminders of the realistic nature of photography resulting in the production of something less artistic and more morally corrupt. This thesis will examine the nude photographs *Mutual Admiration*, *Study of Flying Drapery*, *Torse*, *Youth*, *Fragment*, *Por la Mañana*, *Hebe* and *Pygmalion and Galatea*.

Grotesques are the category defined by dark subject matter, the ability to shock, and a complete lack of reality.¹⁹ According to Mortensen, themes of Grotesques include fear, hatred, pain, the occult, witchcraft and sadism.²⁰ Examples of these themes can be seen in *Fragment of the Black Mass*, *Obsession*, *Preparing for the Sabbot* and *The Spider Torture*, as well as an untitled negative of a nude figure being dragged into the woods by two dark hooded figures.

19. This use of the term Grotesques is based solely on Mortensen's definition. Mortensen explains in *Monsters & Madonnas* that the origin of the word is "derived from the same root as 'grotto.' Thus the grotesque art is, in its origin, closely connected with the rites of deities that were worshipped underground." William Mortensen, "The Pit and the Pendulum" Chap. Grotesques in *Monsters & Madonnas* (San Francisco: Camera Craft Publishing, 1936), unpaginated. A.D. Coleman supports Mortensen's definition in his text *The Grotesque in Photography* (1977).

20. William Mortensen, "Grotesques" in *Monsters & Madonnas* (San Francisco: Camera Craft Publishing, 1936), unpaginated.

Characters

Salome (Fig. 1), which Mortensen credits as being his first photograph accepted in a Salon, is blatantly sexual.²¹ The success of this photograph could be why sexuality is found throughout Mortensen's work. The model sits at the center of the photograph with her head tilted slightly back and to the side. Her long dark hair is wild and wavy. Her eyes look directly at the viewer and her lips are parted slightly. The direction of her head leads the viewer to her bent arm, which ultimately leads to her hand grasping at her exposed breast. Her dress is falling down her body leaving most of her upper torso exposed. The legs are spread slightly open at the bottom of the photograph leading the viewer into the image. There is a bowl of flowers in her lap and her hand seems to be aggressively holding them. The image is very powerful and confrontational. The nudity is minimal but the suggestion of it is fully felt. Even though she is not fully nude she would fall into the Provocative Nude category. Mortensen utilizes the concept of dominant mass to grab the attention of the onlooker. He maintains the attention through the visual interest of the sensual gaze combined with the triangular shape of the arm grasping the breast. The enjoyment in seeing is found in the fact that the woman is exotic and dangerous.

Café Dancer – Stamboul (also known as *Stamboul*) is visually similar to *Salome* and also Provocative. Once again Mortensen utilizes dominant mass by placing the model in the center of the photograph staring directly back at the viewer. What makes this picture different is the fact that *Stamboul* appears to be in a space. The wall behind her has tonal qualities and her hand is rested on a surface draped in fabric. Mortensen

21. William Mortensen, *The Command to Look: A Formula for Picture Success* (San Francisco: Camera Craft Publishing, 1937), 14.

describes *Stamboul* in *The Command to Look*, explaining that the model represents the characteristics of the near East sexuality. He describes it as

joyless, defiant, and predatory. The café dancer of Stamboul does not result in the joy of the flesh - as our healthier Western habit is - but bears its weight languidly. Restraint is there, but it is the restraint of a sleepy tiger. Her hand ever hovers near her dagger.²²



Fig. 3. Mortensen. CAFÉ DANCER – STAMBOUL, ca. 1930.

There is an element of sexual danger that is represented both in *Stamboul* and in *Salome*. The confrontational gaze and the foreign nature of the women, and in the fact that there is a withheld aggression represented by each character, imply the danger. In both photographs the nudity

is minimal and the

22. William Mortensen, "Stamboul" in Chap. Characters in *Monsters & Madonnas* (San Francisco: Camera Craft Publishing, 1936), unpaginated.

sexuality is quite powerful. However *Stamboul* is easier to empathize with because the model is leaning and appears to be in a relaxed state; in *Salome* there is a tension to the pose.



Fig. 4. Mortensen. A SIREN OF THE SOUTH SEAS, ca. 1930.

The sexuality is less aggressive in *A Siren of the South Sea*, a picture of a woman wearing a lei and a grass skirt. One of her legs is posed in such a way that it is more exposed and makes the foot appear more feminine. The lei around her neck dips down and around one of her breasts, which emphasizes the fact that she is exposed. In her hands she holds another lei as she gazes out to the distance. Her overall pose, the slight S-curve, suggests anticipation. The combination of the lei and the anticipatory pose imply that this

semi-nude is the Romantic kind. The feeling that the model is waiting and the extra lei in her hands becomes a kind of story.

The New Race and *The Moroccan Maid* both feature models with fully exposed upper torsos wearing skirts. In both images the model is in the center, closely framed, and the arms are kept close to the body creating a dominant mass. The dominant mass is further emphasized in *The New Race* because the area behind the model is a dark contrast to the model's flesh, which is illuminated by the sun. The model does not make eye

contact with the viewer; instead her eyes are closed with her head tilted slightly backwards. The position of the model's head, her closed eyes and hair blowing in the wind turns into a scenario that the viewer can imagine experiencing. The model's hands are clasped in front of her body just below her naval. Mortensen comments on this choice in posing stating, "Note the almost geometrical regularity of the area enclosed in the arms, hands and shoulders. This angular quality, although unfeminine, increases the impression of massive and primitive strength." In this photograph Mortensen has broken his rule that the fingers should be posed in such a way that each one can be seen in favor of increasing the viewer's experience of the image. The model also demonstrates a slight smile that is read as being sincere and unforced. Sex is intended to be the dominant



Fig. 5. Mortensen. THE NEW RACE, ca. 1930.

theme in *The New Race*, however, Mortensen also intends for the viewer to experience a sense of Wonder related to the fertility and fruitfulness the model embodies.²³ The model is used to represent the Athletic Nude because she is in an outdoor setting in the sunlight.

The Moroccan Maid is more a part of her surroundings than is *The New Race*;



Fig. 6. Mortensen. THE MOROCCAN MAID, ca. 1930.

especially because she is leaning against a rock. The model in the *Moroccan Maid* represents more of a character or type than a feeling like that found in *The New Race*. The model's costume is made of fabric wrapped around her head and waist. Her hands are posed more femininely than those of the model in *The New Race* but with less pictorial interest or importance than those of the models

in *The New Race*, *Café Dancer – Stamboul*, and *Salome*. The model is smiling but it comes

across as being forced. Sex is likely the intended theme due to the fact that the model represents a character from a foreign place.

The Romany Maid is more the Romantic Nude type. She wears a skirt around her waist and her breasts are exposed. In her arm she carries some wood and her opposite hand is rested on her hip. The road she is on extends out behind her. This image stands out amongst the other character images in that the subject is set further in the distance and

23. William Mortensen, *The Command to Look: A Formula for Picture Success* (San Francisco: Camera Craft Publishing, 1937), 158.

the setting is given greater significance. The figure grabs the viewer's attention as a dominant mass because the background is significantly lighter than the main subject.



Fig.7. Mortensen. A ROMANY MAID, ca. 1930.

Woman of Languedoc and *Woman of Arles* are similar to *The Romany Maid* in that the model is representative of a peasant type. What is interesting about the two



Fig.8. Mortensen. WOMAN OF LANGUEDOC. ca. 1930.



Fig. 9. Mortensen. WOMAN OF ARLES, ca. 1930.

pictures is that they are basically the same image. The model is the same, the costume is the same and the background is the same. What varies between the images is the fact that the image has been reversed (the basket and tree swap sides) and in *Woman of Arles*, the image has been cropped closer to the subject. The tonal qualities of the two photographs are very different. The fabric of the costume in *Woman of Languedoc* has significantly more tonal gradation than *Woman of Arles*. Mortensen intended for sex to be the main theme of the image.²⁴ He grabs the viewer's attention once again focusing on the dominant mass and using all of the details of the fabric and basket to maintain the viewer's attention. This is accomplished both through the close proximity of the viewer

24. William Mortensen, *The Command to Look: A Formula for Picture Success* (San Francisco: Camera Craft Publishing, 1937), 120.

to the subject as well the fact that she holds the basket close to her body increasing the subject's interest. The figure is representative of the Romantic Nude in that the scene tells a slight story. Mortensen expresses his interpretation of the story being told,

In the stability of the figure, touching the ground firmly yet not bound down by it, in its buoyant health and the independent lift of the head, there seemed to be expressed something of the spirit of the peasants of the south of France.²⁵

The characters seem to share the theme of exotic women from foreign places or from romanticized walks of life. Even when the character represented is characterized by passivity and domesticity, Mortensen still manages to give the character a strong personality in contrast with similarly themed images from the turn of the twentieth century.

Nudes

We will begin by looking at *Mutual Admiration*, a photograph of

a naked young woman [flirting] shamelessly with a peacock – the male of the species, widely accepted as a symbol of beauty marred only by a surfeit of vanity. The girl stands on tip-toe as if preparing to kiss her lover. Mortensen has cleverly added some touches to suggest the two players are, as it were, of the same species: her hair and his tail, for example, are similar both in texture and in the manner in which they are depicted. The spectator (or, more to the point the voyeur) is treated to a profile of her almost too neatly proportioned nubile body. The great pole that stands rigidly in the centre of the photograph (thus commanding the image, pictorially and psychologically speaking) is instantly recognizable as a phallic symbol, terminating in a perfect knob, which finds its counterpoint in the woman's modest-sized nipple.²⁶

25. William Mortensen, "Woman of Languedoc" in Chap. Characters in *Monsters & Madonnas* (San Francisco: Camera Craft Publishing, 1936), unpaginated.

26. William A. Ewing, ed., *The Century of the Body: 100 photoworks, 1900-2000* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2000), 102-103.

The GEH houses six negatives containing several different poses of the girl and the peacock as well as the print *Mutual Admiration* from one of Mortensen's portfolios.²⁷ Seeing the negative allows us to examine the kinds of changes made in order to create *Mutual Admiration*. Subtle things like the model's hair and the base of the stand on which the peacock is perched on have been altered. What is interesting about



Fig. 10. Mortensen. MUTUAL ADMIRATION, ca. 1930.

the photograph is the fact that there are two subjects, a practice Mortensen tends to avoid

because he feels that it “results in an uncomfortable division of interest.”²⁸ Interaction between the model and the peacock is key in making the composition work. The nude becomes the Romantic Nude type because her relation with the peacock creates a kind of story that speaks to the emotions of sex and sentiment.

27. See Appendix B for examples of the negatives related to *Mutual Admiration*.

28. William Mortensen, “Preparation for the Sabbot” in Chap. Nudes in *Monsters & Madonnas* (San Francisco: Camera Craft Publishing, 1936), unpaginated.

Mortensen also uses sentiment in *Youth* and *Study of a Young Girl*, which he suggests outweighs the sex element.²⁹ In both images we see the use of the dominant mass but the s-curve is used in *Youth* and the diagonal in *Study of a Young Girl*. In both



Fig. 11. Mortensen.
YOUTH, ca. 1930.

photographs the model looks down and away from the camera. This is to maintain the sentimental aspect of the picture; if the model were making eye contact with the viewer it would create a sense of being looked at which would intensify the sexual aspect of the image. Both nudes are intended to represent beauty. In *Youth* the s-curve is reminiscent of sculptures and paintings throughout history.

The contour of her body is nearly perfect. Mortensen describes her as monumental and decorative.³⁰ *Youth* is a perfect example to illustrate how careful Mortensen is with his posing of the hands and feet. Mortensen feels that the hands are expressively important; he states, “next to the face, the hands



Fig. 12. Mortensen.
STUDY OF A
YOUNG GIRL, ca.
1930.

are the most individual and expressive parts of the body.”³¹ Special care should be taken that each finger is clearly defined. Similar care should be taken that the feet are posed in such a way that it compliments their shape so that they do not end up looking like stumps

29. William Mortensen, *The Command to Look: A Formula for Picture Success* (San Francisco: Camera Craft Publishing, 1937), 106 & 124.

30. William Mortensen, “Youth” Chap. Nudes in *Monsters & Madonnas* (San Francisco: Camera Craft Publishing, 1936), unpaginated.

31. William Mortensen, *The Model: A Book on the Problems of Posing* (San Francisco: Camera Craft Publishing, 1937), 61.

or flippers. The feet in this photograph were so important to Mortensen that their position was determined before the rest of the pose was set up.³² The tonal qualities of the figure are even over the entire form emphasizing the importance the shape of the body plays in the image. In *Study of a Young Girl* the tonal qualities around the face are darker than those of her upper torso and breasts putting much more emphasis on her expression. In both photographs the model has down cast eyes suggesting that she is unaware of the viewer, however each models' slight smile illustrates her awareness of the viewer. As mentioned before the down cast eyes maintains the sense of sentimentality but the smile suggests a sense of awareness. In both photographs there is a slight sense of personality that exemplifies Mortensen's tendency to give his models more presence than those that appear in earlier pictorialist work. Mortensen comments on *Study of a Young Girl*, "the principal charm of the picture lies in the equivocal touch supplied by this element of personality. She is the girl-woman, frank, serene and proud. In full consciousness of her



Fig.13. Mortensen.
BAST, ca. 1930.

charm she avoids the two faults of boldness and prudery.”³³

This statement would easily apply to both images.

Bast is quite different than *Study of a Young Girl* and *Youth* in that it embodies the Provocative Nude. The model's lower back starts in the lower left hand side of the image leading the viewer in and up to her face. Her head is tilted back and to the side. According to Mortensen, posing the neck “in this manner the long graceful line of the sterno-cleido-mastoid

32. William Mortensen, “Youth” Chap. Nudes in *Monsters & Madonnas* (San Francisco: Camera Craft Publishing, 1936), unpaginated.

33. William Mortensen, “Portrait of a Young Girl” Chap. Nudes in *Monsters & Madonnas* (San Francisco: Camera Craft Publishing, 1936), unpaginated.

muscle is clearly shown.”³⁴ Posing the neck in this way avoids unattractive creases which make the model look uncomfortable. The line of the neck leads the viewer to the profile of the breasts. Mortensen likely put the model’s torso into profile view to accentuate the pear shape of the breasts, which Mortensen finds to be the most beautiful and appropriate shape for pictorial work. The close proximity the viewer has to the model emphasizes the use of dominant mass, and the model leaning across the frame creates a diagonal line. Sex is the main theme of this image as the pose and direct glance validate.

Sex is also the main theme of *Study of Flying Drapery*. In the image the model is depicted floating in the air with what appears to be a tornado around her legs and feet. Her head is back and her expression is euphoric. The expression, in combination with the possible suggestion of the flying fabric, seems to refer to an orgasmic experience. The handwork on the right leg seems over done and makes the posing of that leg seem unnatural. The upper body has had less alteration and there exists a definite difference between the tonal quality of the upper and lower halves of the body. This photograph seems less successful than the other nudes. The



Fig. 14. Mortensen. STUDY OF FLYING DRAPERY, ca. 1930.

34. William Mortensen, *The Model: A Book on the Problems of Posing* (San Francisco: Camera Craft Publishing, 1937), 52.

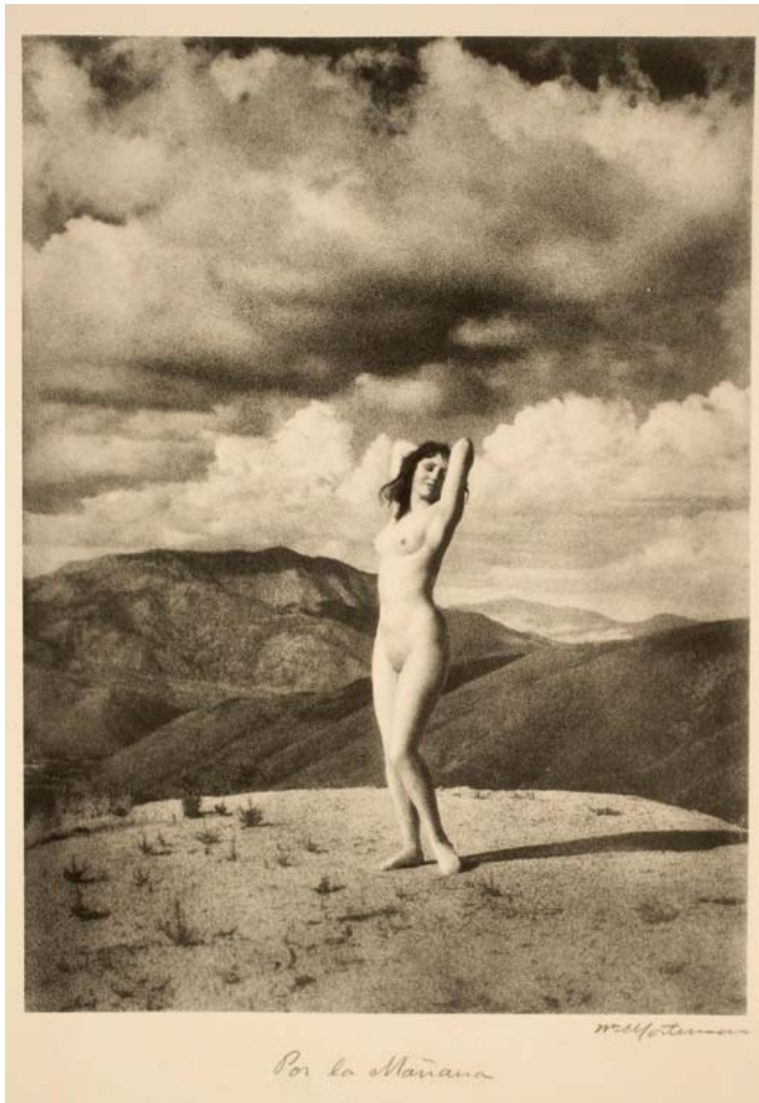


Fig. 15. Mortensen. POR LA MAÑANA, ca. 1930.

fact that the lower half of the body appears uncomfortably posed, and the overall pose seems unnatural for floating, results in a reduced ability to relate with the subject matter. The model looks uncomfortable; therefore, the image is uncomfortable to view.

A more successful image but strikingly different, is *Por la Mañana*, an image of a nude figure standing basking in the sun; there are mountains behind

her and the sky is full of puffy clouds. The figure is posed in an s-curve and embodies the Athletic Nude. Mortensen preferred to work in the studio where lighting is more controllable and in most of his photographs, the models lack pubic hair. However, as stated previously, Mortensen believed pubic hair was appropriate for images shot outside in natural settings. That being said it seems out of place that the model in *Por la Mañana* is lacking pubic hair. The background is given equal importance to the figure similarly to

The New Race. This image seems to be more about wonder than sex or sentiment; this theory is corroborated by the pose of the figure, which seems to be enjoying and experiencing the great outdoors. The sense of wonder is further emphasized by the pictorial attention that has been given to the outdoor setting. The pose in combination with the scene allows the viewer the chance to imagine himself or herself experiencing the same thing the model is experiencing. We can also speculate that this photograph is a reference to nudism, which Mortensen mentions in *Monsters & Madonnas* as growing in popularity.³⁵

The last three photographs in the nude category from GEH are *Torse*, *Hebe*, and *Fragment*. These three images share an extreme depersonalization of the nude. In *Hebe*



Fig. 16. Mortensen. TORSE, ca. 1930.

and *Fragment* the model has been covered in makeup to make her appear more like plaster. Additionally, when producing the final image Mortensen added chips and pits to make the bodies seem more

like stone. Both images utilize dominant mass

and the s-curve. In *Torse* Mortensen has utilized plastic lighting and posed the body in such a way that it is devoid of any personality; the subject holds the viewer's attention through the use of a strong diagonal line. All three of these



Fig. 17. Mortensen. FRAGMENT, ca. 1930.

35. William Mortensen, "Youth" Chap. Nudes in *Monsters & Madonnas* (San Francisco: Camera Craft Publishing, 1936), unpaginated.

images become less about empathy and more about structure and beauty of form.

Mortensen comments on *Fragment* in the *Command to Look*, stating,

Sex is not so much the subject interest here as the sentiment evoked by brave and gallant remnants of the past. The transformation of a living body into an apparent fragment of statuary helps to bring it nearer to a universal symbol. By this drastic mutilation, all realistic suggestions of time, place and personality are wiped out, and nothing remains except the external mystery of the female body.³⁶



Fig. 18. Mortensen. HEBE, ca. 1930.

The same thoughts apply just as easily to *Hebe* except this image is not just meant to evoke the past but a specific story as *Hebe* is a goddess in Greek mythology. Both *Fragment* and *Hebe* are Romantic Nudes, whereas *Torse* is a Decorative Nude.

The thing all these photographs have in common is the fact that nudity is primary; they contrast from the character category because they are more general in their universal appeal. The subject interest in the character category resulted from the fact that the models represented exotic people. The subject interest in the nude category is more generic

possibly resulting in a more widespread appeal.

Grotesques

Preparing for the Sabbot (also known as *Preparation for the Sabbot*) is exemplary of the grotesques category of imagery because the image would have been

36. William Mortensen, *The Command to Look: A Formula for Picture Success* (San Francisco: Camera Craft Publishing, 1937), 118.



Fig. 19. Mortensen. PREPARING FOR THE SABBOT, ca. 1930.



Fig. 20 Mortensen. PREPARING FOR THE SABBOT, ca. 1930.

shocking for its time and its subject interest involves witchcraft. Mortensen describes this image in *Monsters & Madonnas*, stating,

The young witch, eager and exuberant, is being rubbed by the old witch with a magic ointment. By the virtue of the salve, according to tradition, the witches were enabled to fly to their assemblies.³⁷

The combination of the young nude body being rubbed down, the phallic symbol of the broom between her legs, her acknowledgement of the viewer with her direct eye contact and smile and her seductive pose all emphasize the highly sexualized nature of this photograph. The well-lit body against the dark background emphasizes the use of dominant mass. The sexy pose also contains suggestion of the s-curve while he broom

37. William Mortensen, "Preparation for the Sabbot" Chap. Grotesques in *Monsters & Madonnas* (San Francisco: Camera Craft Publishing, 1936), unpaginated.



Fig. 21. Mortensen. THE SPIDER TORTURE, ca. 1930.

gives a sense of the diagonal line. Despite the incorporation of a story, this nude is much more provocative than it is romantic.

Another Mortensen image with more than one title is *The Spider Torture*, also called *The Heretic*. The image depicts a woman bound wearing nothing but some rags around her hips. The position of her body appears very uncomfortable, but part of the point of the image is the uneasy feeling it will cause inside

the viewer.

Once again

Mortensen has utilized the dominant mass by creating a high tonal contrast between the main subject and the background. Mortensen classifies this image as appealing to the human emotion of wonder but does not deny the sexual interest.³⁸ The sexual interest in this image is incongruent in comparison to the other examples of sexual interest in Mortensen work because in most of Mortensen's photographs the model is empowered. Here, however, the model is bound and the viewer is given the ability to empathize with the sense of dominance over the subject. The subject appears to



Fig. 22. Mortensen. [Woman with two hooded figures], ca. 1930.

38. William Mortensen, *The Command to Look: A Formula for Picture Success* (San Francisco: Camera Craft Publishing, 1937), 112.

be in pain as the ropes press deep into her flesh and yet the main focal interest is the strange pose of her practically naked body.

The untitled negative of a nude figure being dominated by two hooded figures also lacks the female figure's empowerment that exists in most of Mortensen's images. We can only surmise how this image would have looked as a pictorial photograph but we

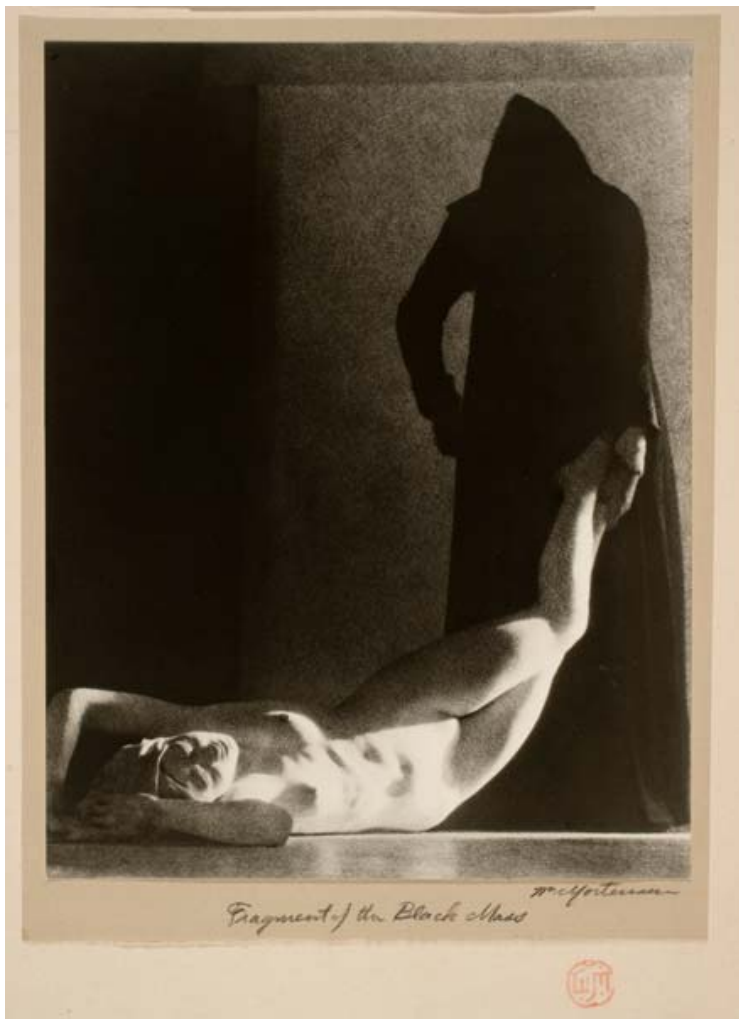


Fig. 23. Mortensen. FRAGMENT OF THE BLACK MASS, ca. 1930.

can imagine that Mortensen may have darkened the surroundings, lessened the details of the foreground and played down the two hooded subjects. These choices would have increased the sense of dominant mass. Both the emotions of sex and wonder exist in this image, but the pose, combined with the struggle with the hooded figures, validates the element of sex.

The last two images in the grotesques category are

Obsession (Fig. 2, also known as *Fear*) and *Fragment of the Black Mass* (also referred to as *Death of Hepatia*). Both images depict nude female figures with dark hooded figures

dominating them. *Obsession* utilizes the dominant mass as well as Mortensen's printing technique of elongation. *Obsession* appeals more to the viewer's sense of wonder than it does to sex. However, *Fragment of the Black Mass* depicts the dark hooded figure dragging away the nude figure which lends itself to the theme of sex while the mystery of the scene enthralls a sense of wonder. The strong diagonal line of the nude figure is in extreme contrast to the dark hooded figure looming over the subject. Both nudes would fall into the Romantic Nude category, as each is episodic.

It is curious that the published photographs from this category each have two different titles. Part of the reason Mortensen was attracted to photography of what he considered to be grotesque is that it is completely removed from any sense of reality. Perhaps that is why these images have more than one title - they can be interpreted as different stories.

Mortensen Negatives

There are three series of negatives in the GEH collection that were definitely created by Mortensen; unfortunately we currently know little else about them. They are still worth examining, however, because examining sets of negatives shot at the same time allows



Fig. 24. Mortensen. [Woman covering herself with umbrella], ca. 1930.

us to better see Mortensen's creative process. Of two of the series it is impossible to predict whether the resulting pictorial photograph would have been categorized into characters, nudes or grotesques because the images vary and they are in raw form.

The first series consists of five negatives of a woman with a parasol.³⁹ In four of the images she appears to be nude covering herself with the umbrella; in the fifth she is wearing a dress and a garter with her leg bent in the air and her parasol on her shoulder. Mortensen himself can be seen walking through one of the frames of the woman hiding her body behind the umbrella. If Mortensen is in the frame who is behind the camera? It is possible that it may be his longtime friend, assistant and collaborator George Dunham, or maybe one of his students. It is impossible to know for sure but it raises an interesting question. No matter which of the negatives from this series Mortensen would have chosen to use, the end result would have been provocative due to the poses, expressions, and props.

The second series of negatives, consisting of seven negatives of a girl posing with a giant clock, would also be considered provocative.⁴⁰ In two of the negatives, the model is wearing a costume with stockings and standing beside the clock. In the other five, the model is nude, except for ribbons tied around each wrist, and is standing behind the clock in various poses. All of these compositions use the dominant mass.



Fig. 25. Mortensen.
[Woman posing with giant
clock], ca. 1930.

39. See Appendix C for reproductions of other negatives in this grouping.

40. See Appendix D for reproductions of other negatives in this grouping.

It is possible for both sets of negatives that if Mortensen chosen to use the negatives in which the girls were clothed, the resulting photograph may have turned into a character. Interestingly, both sets of negatives seem to break one of Mortensen's rules.

In *The Model: A Book on the Problems of Posing*, Mortensen states,

How shall an inexperienced model be introduced to the question of posing in the nude? Probably the worst of all ways of accomplishing this is the slow disrobing method practiced by some photographers – a gradual insinuating away of the model's clothes. This 'strip tease' method is open to numerous objections. In the first place, it is definitely erotic in its implications. Furthermore, it has a most unfortunate effect on the model. The gradual removal of her clothes makes her all the more keenly aware of them and her need of them. When the ultimate garment is removed, she is so thoroughly embarrassed that there is little hope of securing good pictures.⁴¹

It appears that a strip tease of sorts is occurring in both series of negatives. Whether the model is inexperienced or seasoned, the situation still seems erotic in its implications. It should also be noted that both groups of negatives share a common element of clothes and props in combination with the nude. Mortensen states, "This use is only permissible in nudes of the lighter *Vie Parisienne* type, in which the provocative touch imparted by clothes is appropriate."⁴² The resulting image from these negatives would have likely been of the lighter "*Vie Parisienne*" type.

The last series of negatives are half frames and still attached in small sections of three or four frames. The first four images depict a scene that appears to be an artist's studio. In the center of the image is a man, playing the role of the artist, and a woman on a pedestal possibly covered in makeup so that she will appear more like a sculpture in the final print. The story being recreated is that of Pygmalion and Galatea. The rest of the

41. William Mortensen, *The Model: A Book on the Problems of Posing* (San Francisco: Camera Craft Publishing, 1937), 214.

42. William Mortensen, "Frou Frou" Chap. Nudes in *Monsters & Madonnas* (San Francisco: Camera Craft Publishing, 1936), unpaginated.

frames are close ups of the model on the pedestal posing as a sculpture. These frames could have been used to produce images similar to *Hebe* or *Fragment*. The frames of the model by herself definitely utilize dominant mass and it is likely that the resulting picture of the man and model would have also been. The nude in this series is unquestionably the Romantic type as the story of Pygmalion and Galatea is quite common and would appeal

to a general audience.

Some commonalities amongst all the photographs examined are a frequent use of dominant mass to grab the viewer's attention. Mortensen also relies heavily on sex to appeal to the viewer's emotions. He seems to follow all of his own rules and his work seems to fit into his self-defined categories of characters, nudes, and grotesques.



Fig. 26. Mortensen. [Pygmalion and Galatea], ca. 1930.

CONCLUSION

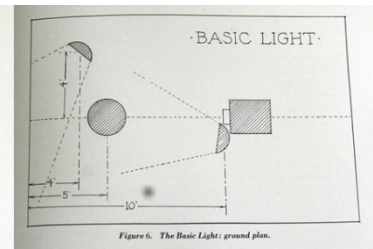
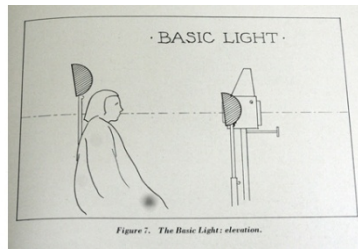
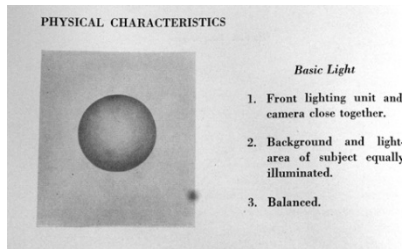
Mortensen believed the nude female form was more perfect for any other artistic medium because of its tonal qualities. For Mortensen, the production of an image began with a negative, which could not exist without the model. Ultimately the model becomes a key element, especially for Mortensen who relies on appealing to the human emotions of sex, sentiment, and wonder. The success of a picture is dependent on the viewer's ability to look at the image and feel something. Mortensen knew that his subject matter needed to be universal and slightly generic in order to attract a wide audience. Of the three emotions, Mortensen defined sex is likely the most universal and Mortensen used this to his advantage.

In addition to the theme of sex, another commonality in Mortensen's work is the fact that the model has a certain amount of empowerment or dominance in the image. In much of the pictorial work before Mortensen the women, especially the nudes, appeared passive. They were stripped of their personality through posing and diffusion lenses. Mortensen felt that personality was out of place in photographs of the nude; the personality that exists in a Mortensen image is not that of Mary or Beth or whatever the name of the model - it is the personality of a universal type. The slight smile in *Youth* or *Portrait of a Young Girl* is part of what makes the viewer empathize with that moment, just as they do with the direct eye contact of an image like *Salome*.

In order to fully understand Mortensen's work, all of his photographs would need to be examined to see if the patterns found in the collection at the George Eastman House International Museum of Photography and Film hold true to his entire oeuvre. Ultimately

what is useful about this thesis is that it gives a foundation for further research into Mortensen's work, an area that has received little attention.

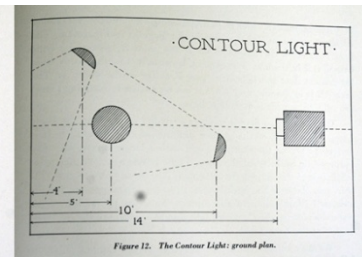
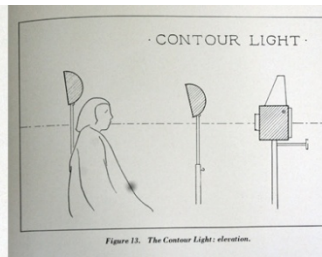
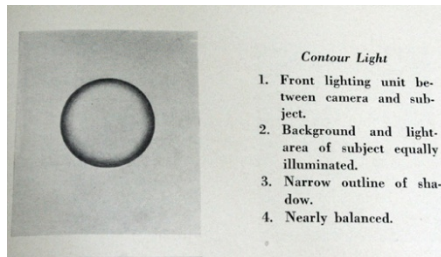
APPENDIX A



William Mortensen, *Pictorial Lighting* (San Francisco: Camera Craft Publishing Company, 1936), 70.

William Mortensen, *Pictorial Lighting* (San Francisco: Camera Craft Publishing Company, 1936), 31.

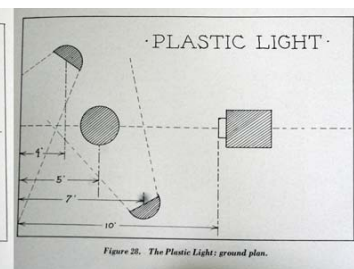
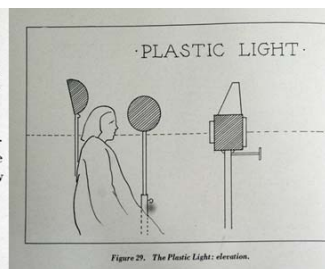
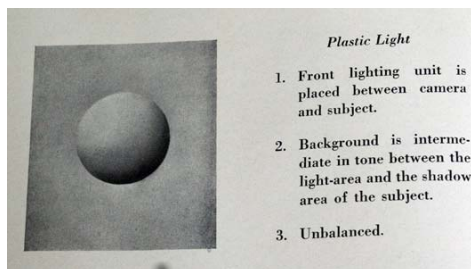
William Mortensen, *Pictorial Lighting* (San Francisco: Camera Craft Publishing Company, 1936), 29.



William Mortensen, *Pictorial Lighting* (San Francisco: Camera Craft Publishing Company, 1936), 71.

William Mortensen, *Pictorial Lighting* (San Francisco: Camera Craft Publishing Company, 1936), 41.

William Mortensen, *Pictorial Lighting* (San Francisco: Camera Craft Publishing Company, 1936), 39.

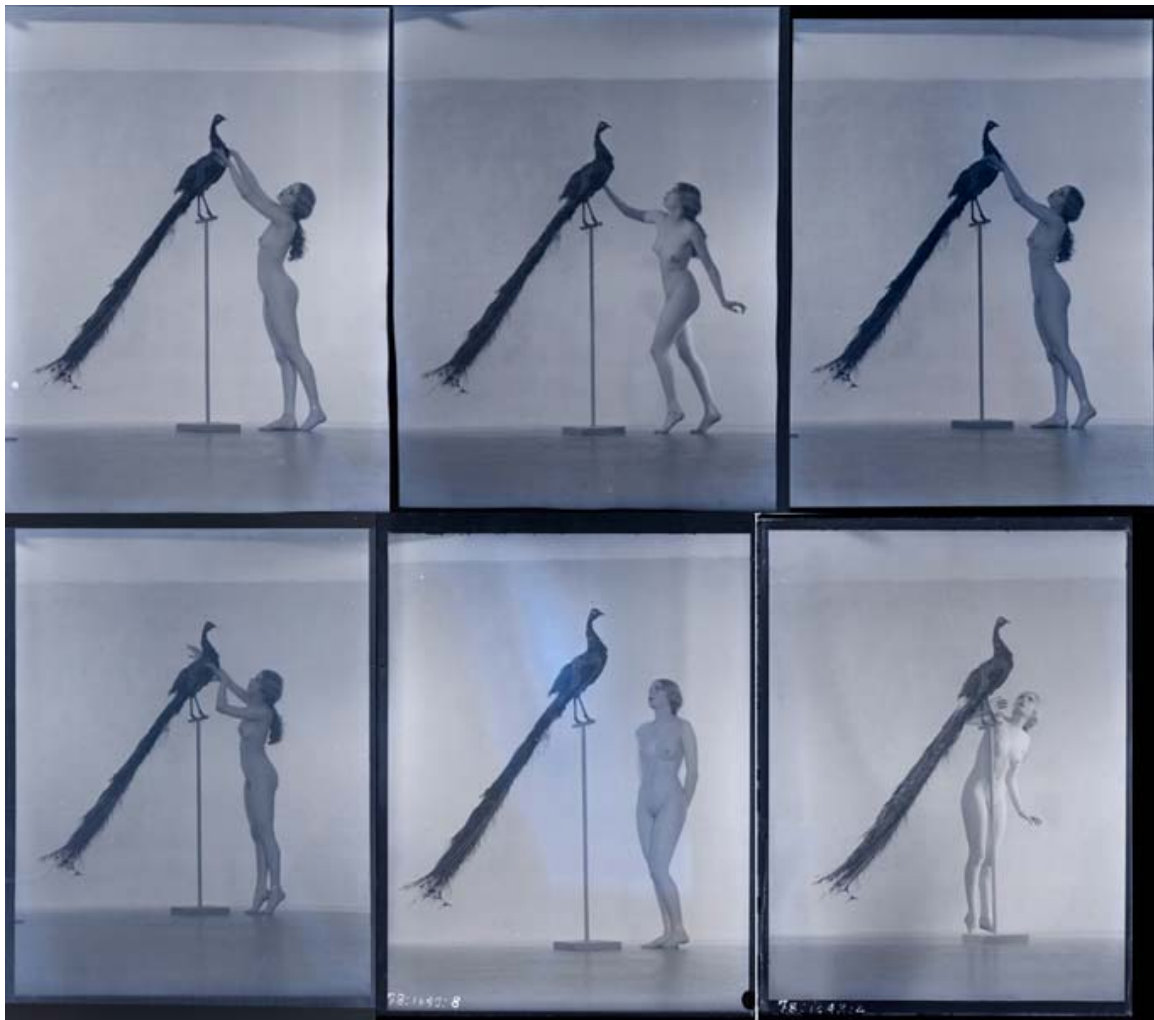


William Mortensen, *Pictorial Lighting* (San Francisco: Camera Craft Publishing Company, 1936), 72.

William Mortensen, *Pictorial Lighting* (San Francisco: Camera Craft Publishing Company, 1936), 68.

William Mortensen, *Pictorial Lighting* (San Francisco: Camera Craft Publishing Company, 1936), 67.

APPENDIX B



William Mortensen, (American, 1897-1965). [Woman with peacock], ca. 1930. Six digitally inverted images from glass and film negatives.

Courtesy of the George Eastman House.

APPENDIX C



William Mortensen, (American, 1897-1965). [Woman with umbrella], ca. 1930. Five digitally inverted images from film negatives. Courtesy of the George Eastman House.

APPENDIX D



William Mortensen, (American, 1897-1965). [Woman with giant clock], ca. 1930.

Digitally inverted images from glass negatives. Courtesy of the George Eastman House.

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