

Betsy Sussler , “Light”
Exhibition Essay for Ricco/Maresca Gallery
Fall 2001

My father was a storyteller, at his best when driving our old black Buick with me in the passenger seat, his captivated audience. Often his tales, woven from family myth, would digress into metaphysics. A self-avowed agnostic with an astute understanding of theatrical mood, he would take his cue from the fading light. We were riding on the old New London Highway, a country road that cut through a forest of birch, when he said: “We take the form of electricity when we die, and travel like light through the universe until we settle into another body”. I stared out the car window: the street lamps came on, their amber glow illuminating the border between our world and the trees’ and I imagined a wild, invisible energy flying through the trunks, surging through the black electrical lines strung overhead. My father turned on the Buick’s headlights; in their beams I could see swarming particles tossed by our car’s acceleration and I felt my skin to be a fragile, permeable substance between my being and the rest of my life.

Many years later, while standing with Amanda Means in her studio, staring at the incandescent lines of electricity and filament encased in light bulbs, the subject of her latest photographs, I asked, “What ever possessed you?”

Amanda’s voice had a secretive timbre, low and full: “I was walking in this forlorn area of Brooklyn, just beyond the Williamsburg Bridge, and industrial neighborhood. It was twilight and the skyscrapers across the river were beginning to light up. I passed a generator, electrical cords leading into an open garage, and I turned to see men working under a lantern in this heavy yellow light. They were using machinery, welding perhaps, and I could feel the electrical current just sucking the energy. It was one of those moments.” And I remembered that time on the country road.

The mythologist, C. Kerényi has noted that philosophy’s main vehicle is thought, and mythology’s the image. The image of an industrial light bulb, at times incandescent, revealing its electrical source in the tungsten filament, its glass case a transparent reflector, is an inspired choice. Here the subject of light, a mythical one, is viewed in the context of a mass-produced object. Using an enlarger rather than a camera, Means places her subject between its lens and the enlarging light. In the resulting black and white images, light and dark are reversed, what’s positive reads negative and vice versa; saturation depends upon the transparency or opacity of the object and the location(s) of its light source. In their reversal, these images make visible that which is barely visible.

Photographing light has been a constant preoccupation for Means; photosynthesis comes to mind when looking at her earlier rayograms of flowers, light as a source of life and energy. The inanimate, manufactured light bulb might seem to be at odds with nature, but Means's focus remains, it’s revealed at the bulb’s core; this time electricity contains the life force. Virginia Wolf’s character, Septimus, in her famed *Mrs. Dalloway*, describes this sort of Transcendentalism. And yes, madness in encroaching: “But they

beckoned; leaves were alive; trees were alive. And the leaves being connected by millions of fibres with his own body, there on the seat, fanned it up and down; when the branch stretched he, too, made that statement. The sparrows fluttering, rising and falling in the jagged fountains were part of the pattern...they (the sparrows) sang in voices prolonged and piercing in Greek words, from trees in the meadow of life beyond a river where the dead walk, how there is no death.”

Woolf’s virtuoso and inspired handling of her medium keeps the sentimentality that too often accompanies that sense of wonder at bay. The same can be said of Amanda Means in relation to these photographs. They are modern and ironic, iconoclastic and iconic. It’s not only the irony of the mundane light bulb and applied science of electricity standing in for a mythic life force that accomplishes this, but also the craft of art brought to bear in rendering it. That light bulb is burned, drawn and coaxed into and out of the paper’s silver coat through Means’s prodigious knowledge of her craft, her lived experience, her understanding of photographic history and the sheer beauty she pulls out of her artistic practice.

Antiquity’s God of Light, Mithra, enacts a creation story of death and resurrection that unleashes both good and evil. His journey prefigures the Mithraic soul which descends through the seven spheres to inhabit a body. Man’s task is to liberate his divine part, the soul, so that it can re-ascend to the eternal. It is no accident that the light bulb in Means’s photographs takes on an anthropomorphic shape resembling our own head (precursor of both good and evil). Here, light is a stand-in for the spirit, reminding us of whence we’ve come.