

Becoming: The Photographs of Clementina Vicountess Hawarden

Carol Mavor

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Certain photographs, by virtue of composition, light or subject, have the ability to draw a viewer into another world, to make one yearn for intimate knowledge of the photographer and the subject, to cause a kind of minor obsession of seeing, where simple viewing is never enough.

The elegant and enigmatic photographs of Clementina, Viscountess Hawarden (1822-1865) possess this power, especially for Carol Mavor, whose passionate writing about the Victorian socialite's private work illuminates more than just a single important woman photographer whom history has overlooked. It also addresses a myriad of intermingled issues that the photographs invoke: gender, motherhood, sexuality, loss, illusion and fetish.

Lady Hawarden's work, shown only twice at amateur exhibits during her short lifetime, uses her children as subjects, mainly her three adolescent daughters posing in a manner both provocative and innocent, capturing the ridge between childhood and adulthood with the kind of sensitivity displayed in the undertakings of twentieth century photographers Sally Mann and Francesca Woodman. Like those artists, Hawarden uses implied sensuality, such as one daughter tasting her sister's fingers, or a dress pulled up to reveal ankles crossed with ribbons.

Combining autobiography with scholarly study, Mavor is unflinchingly honest in describing how these images affect her: "Although my fingertips have longed to touch the beaten hems of their skirts, the netting of their headdresses, the wires of their crinolines, the silkiness of their tights, I have only touched the precious edges of their pictures." She goes on to analyze the photos themselves from several vantage points, weaving together psychoanalysis and cultural theory with thoughts on voyeurism, eroticism and maternity. Even when delving into how Hawarden can be compared to Vermeer or Lewis Carroll, Mavor maintains a gripping and breathless tone, inviting the reader into her beautiful compulsion and unveiling the gorgeous nuances behind Hawarden's portraits.

ELIZABETH MILLARD (September / October 1999)

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