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**Photographer Lanning Gold creates
art using unconventional models.
(Hint: they can stand very, very still.)**

by Stephen Lemons

Shopworn Angels

Photographer Lanning Gold's dolled-up mannequin femme fatales make eerily erotic models

by Stephen Lemons

Upon entering the Onyx, owner John Leech's coffeehouse-cum-gallery at 1802 N. Vermont Ave. in Los Feliz, one hardly expects to find oneself surrounded by a pantheon of provocative femme fatales. From its bohemian exterior, one can plainly see it's a gathering place for artists, actors, musicians, poets and writers of all persuasions. It's a place to read or write in solitude, a place to discuss the latest art films with one's compatriots or a place to sip that espresso far from the prefabricated, commercial excess of Starbucks or Pasqua. Here is a coffeehouse true to the moniker, where the tradition of the alternative meeting place goes back to the Parisian Left Bank of the '20s thrives. Amidst the Greenwich Village-like trendiness of the area, Onyx offers an oasis of cultural sanity where one can flee to at all hours in order to find some solace.

Certainly, Onyx doesn't disappoint as a coffeehouse. But happening upon one of the best independent gallery exhibitions now on view in Los Angeles at this cafe is truly angelfood for the soul. If you hurry, you may get a chance to view Onyx's current display of the work of photographer/artist Lanning Gold. Gold's work is, quite simply, spellbinding. He has filled the coffeehouse's large main space with 33 of his finest, most alluring portraits. They are portraits of models whose haughty, beautiful faces and forms give powerful evidence of the divinity of women.

"I thought, 'My God. This is pretty unusual. You don't see this every day — a mannequin with her tongue sticking out.' So I had to photograph her."

Gold's series of striking portraits uses a variety of intense, vibrant colors to fix our eyes upon these darkly erotic female images originally shot in black and white. The bright yellow aura of the scantily clad siren of "Sunday's Raincoat" or the soft lavender dress and headpiece of the glacial beauty at the center of "Grape Dance" or the rich, velvety red of the Night Porter-style pasties and underwear of the

blond dominatrix in "Jailbait" give an otherworldly, surreal glaze to these already attractive women. One is so taken by Gold's work that it comes as a surprise when one slowly realizes that these are portraits not of flesh and blood women, but of mannequins — shopworn angels like those which populate storefronts throughout L.A. These sad but beautiful creatures have only a brief existence behind the windows of apparel stores before they are torn down in order to be reassembled and reformed by their masters. Fortunately for them, Gold has chosen to give them another, more lasting life in his art. *Entertainment Today* queried Gold about his creations, his labors of love, while sitting in the sparsely populated galleryspace at Onyx one languid Saturday Afternoon.

Entertainment Today: *Photographing mannequins the way you do is very original. Has anyone ever done this before?*

Lanning Gold: Not that I'm aware of. As far as I know, I'm the first person who works with black and white images of mannequins and then hand tints them and personalizes them to a certain extent.

ET: *What's the process of handtinting? What exactly does that involve?*

LG: Basically it's photographic oil paint and photographic pencils. It's just a matter of blending the colors on top of the black and white image.

ET: *Your style seems very unique. Have you ever done this with live models?*

LG: Sometimes. Sometimes models will say they want an image or a finished piece of artwork that's similar to one of the mannequins series paintings.

ET: *When exactly did you get this idea? What prompted it?*

LG: It was a number of years ago. I had photographed some of the mannequins, and I wasn't happy with the way they looked. Some of them looked strikingly real, but still didn't cut the mustard. So I thought, "Well, what would happen if I colored them?" All of a sudden, it was like breath-



Naughty and nice: two works from Gold's hand tinted mannequin series.

ing life into them. Once the colors went onto the image, the piece had a life of its own. And I found that by selecting the colors, deciding who's going to be the blonde or the redhead, I could alter them to my own liking and at the same time make them a little more alive.

ET: *In a recent article in Chic, describing your work, you mentioned driving around at night and peering into storefront windows in pursuit of possible models. Is this how you normally operate?*

LG: I'm always looking for interesting windows. If I see one late at night, I'll slam on the brakes, jump out of the car, grab my tripod and try to capture the girls in the window. If I can find a good angle where they look fairly real, then I have a feeling of accomplishment. If not, then I say, "O.K. I'll wait 'till the next window."

ET: *So you rely on serendipity a lot for inspiration?*

LG: For this particular series, yes. There may be other series in the future where I'll be working with my own mannequins. But for now, I'm working strictly from the street — strictly from the sidewalk and whatever's out there.

ET: *There's something very cool about doing that — being on the street, seeing something you like and using it. Have you ever used your own mannequins?*

LG: I haven't done that yet, but I'm planning to work on some stuff that will be with my own mannequins. But as far as this series is concerned, it's strictly street photography.

ET: *Are people ever offended by your photos?*

LG: Every once in a while somebody finds

the imagery offensive. It's funny. I think people are schizoid about it because every now and then I'll come across a woman who finds them offensive but at the same time she'll be in love with one of them.

ET: Obviously, they're highly erotic. There's also an element of the femme fatale about them – something dangerous. They're attractive, but it's a sort of dangerous attraction.

LG: Well, I try to incorporate everything. A little S & M, a little romance, a little bondage, you know.

ET: [Pointing at one of the photos.] This photograph over here with the woman licking her lips – was that one of your first ones?

LG: Yes. [Becoming excited.] That was one of my first ones. What happened was that I was driving by a store window, and noticed that the mannequin had her tongue sticking out. I thought, "My God. This is pretty unusual. You don't see this every day – a mannequin with her tongue sticking out." So I had to photograph her. She seems so casual just sitting there with her legs crossed and one hand above her head. I call her, "Nasty."

ET: "Nasty," that's the name of the photo?

LG: [Chuckling.] Yeah.

ET: Do you recall the store window that was in?

LG: I don't want to mention the store names.

ET: Have you ever talked to the owners of the stores at all?

LG: It's funny you mention that because three of the four pieces that have been sold at this show were sold to the owner of the mannequins you see in those pieces.

ET: Really?

LG: Yeah, and it was really funny because the

why the girls become other people every month.

ET: But like Nasty for instance, with her tongue sticking out. I wonder if someone ordered it that way or if it just came that way from some mannequin production place.

LG: Well it was originally sculpted, and probably there was a woman who posed for it just like that.

ET: I didn't realize that women actually pose for the mannequins.

LG: Yes, they're sculpted and cast like that. In fact, sometimes famous models will have their body parts or their faces cast to become mannequins.

ET: That's interesting because initially when one sees your work, the subjects look like models. Like this photo. [Pointing to a large piece.] Which one is this we're looking at?

LG: Oh, that's called "Grape Dance."

ET: I like that one a lot, and that obviously looks like a live model. I can't see anything that gives it away. You might be able to point something out. Except – are those two bodies on the sides?

LG: Yeah. Well if you look at the other two figures, to me they're a little fake.

ET: But the one in the middle is very lifelike.

LG: Yeah, she's got that Carmen Miranda kind of look. That's one of my favorite ones because it looks like there's a party going on. My favorite windows are ones where it looks like everyone's alive or for some reason it looks animated because of the interaction between the subjects. That makes it a successful window, and that makes it more appealing for me to photograph.

ET: Definitely the sleight of hand effect you achieve is very interesting. You know, how it seems as if there is a live model, and there seems to be some action going on there. It looks like it could have been shot at some fashion show. Any of these could have been shot at a fashion show, actually.

LG: It's all fashion though, basically.

ET: Was that what intrigued you – that they looked like live women – or was their something else you were after in photographing these models?

LG: What I'm doing is I'm creating a fantasy world. I'm personalizing that world even though I'm documenting a store window. On the one hand it's being documented by me. On the other hand by creating the photo, coming up

with the colors, deciding whether the girls are going to be redheads or blondes, I'm changing everything around so that it's my own little fantasy world. It's like a window into that world.

ET: You know feminists would have a field day with that.

LG: [Laughing.] Yeah, I know.

ET: It is certainly odd to be sexually attracted to an inanimate object.

LG: That's the whole thing. I'm trying to make the inanimate animate.

ET: You definitely achieve that. Although occasionally you do spot something that will give it away.

LG: That's the fun part. If you look carefully enough, you will realize that you are looking at an inanimate object. But at first glance it's not obvious, hopefully.

ET: Do women and men respond differently to your pictures?

LG: I think women are more attracted to the fashion aspect and the posing whereas men are more into the sensuality and the look of the women themselves.

ET: Do you think women are just naturally more attractive than men? Is that why your models are all female?

LG: Well, the female form is a beautiful form. And historically great art has always been of women. I think this series lends itself traditionally along these lines as well as the fact that I'm a guy. I enjoy working with the female form.

ET: The chic article says you have a website? What's that like?

LG: The way it's set up right now, I have two different pages. One's called "Nice Girls," and one's called the "Naughty Girls." I have six different pics scanned into each.

ET: Why did you decide to do the website?

LG: I think every photographer and artist should be on the web. It's the way you get your work out there. In this day and age, the more exposure the better.

ET: But are you afraid your work will be ripped off?

LG: No. If someone tries to reproduce one of my pieces, it won't be as good as the original. And any serious collector knows that. In any case, all of my work is copyrighted.

ET: Any future plans for the site?

LG: In the future, I want my girls to speak. Of course, it will have to be something of literary value.

ET: That idea has sort of a Blade Runner quality about it.

LG: Blade Runner is a film people often mention in connection with my work. Another is The Stepford Wives. People often ask if I prefer that kind of fantasy world to reality. The answer is no. I prefer the company of real women. But as a photographer and artist, I enjoy the challenge of breathing life into these fiberglass people.

ET: For those who can't make it to the Onyx show, what's the website address?

LG: It's at <http://www.loop.com/~mannequin/>.

ET: What other photographers and artists do you admire or have influenced you?

LG: I like Andy Warhol. Everything he did I love. The risks he took at the time he took them always made me respect him. He's my favorite. But I also love Man Ray.

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The artist/photographer at his exhibit in Los Feliz's Onyx coffeehouse.

owner started to fall in love with the image and he couldn't figure out exactly why. Then it dawned on him that this was the image of his own mannequin of his own store. It was kind of like a Twilight Zone episode for him.

ET: Do they buy those mannequins or do they rent them? Do you have any idea?

LG: Well a friend of mine is a dresser and he rents his mannequins to certain stores, but most stores own their own. Every month they switch the wigs around and change the clothing. That's

Lanning Gold's work will be at Onyx until March 10. Onyx is located at 1802 N. Vermont Ave. in Los Feliz and is open from 9-3 a.m., Sunday-Thursday; 9-4 a.m., Friday-Saturday. Onyx has no phone, but Lanning Gold can be reached at (323) 936-5580.