

Reflection I: Nancy Burson.

Chimaeras.

(For: European Photography.)

A revolutionary new mentality is about to emerge: we shatter the world to bits, and then remould it nearer to the heart's desire. (Rubayat, Omar Khayyam). To put it less poetically: we calculate the world, and then we compute it. Nancy Burson's pictures are products of that new mentality. And they also show it: they show what sort of world will result from that mentality: a world of chimaeras.

The heart desires something: for instance an androgynous human being, or an accomplished Big Brother, or a perfect female beauty. Such a desire may be called a "program". In order to realize such a program in the form of an image, various available photos should be chosen. In the first case the photos of six women and six men, in the second case the photos of Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin, Mao and Khomeiny, in the third case the photos of Bette Davies, Audrey Hepburn, Grace Kelly, Sophia Loren and Marilyn Monroe. Each of those photos is to be calculated: dissected into very small squares called "pixels". Those calculations are to be fed into a computer, which is to be instructed to compute the desired image from those pixels according to the program. The result will be Burson's photos of chimaeras.

"Chimaera" is an ancient word, and it means a composite fabulous beast: a goat with a lion's head and a tail of serpents. One might thus be lead to believe that the mythical Ancients knew how to calculate and to compute, but one would be mistaken. The mythical chimaera was a collage, a patchwork. If Bellerophon, who fought it heroically, had kicked it, (instead of fighting it heroically), its head would have rolled on one side, its tail on the other. This is quite different with the newly emerging, "true" chimaeras. You may kick Burson's Big Brother as long as you like, he will never desintegrate into Hitler, Mussolini and so forth. And if you take a "geep", (a chimaera computed from a goat and a sheep), and if you kick it, it will blabber, (or whatever is the appropriate geep sound). The new, "true" chimaeras are consistent, autonomous phenomena. This is the way with myths: as soon as they become real, they look differently from what was expected of them.

The new chimaerical mentality manifests itself predominantly in two tendencies: the "telematic" one and the "biotechnical" one. The first tendency dissects the world into information bits, and it computes new, chimaerical information from this. The other tendecu dissetts living organisms into information bits called "genes", and it computes new, chimaerical organisms from this. Burson's pictures are examples for the first tendency, the "geep" is an example for the second one. If one feels like it, one may call the first tendency "art", and the second one "science". But both those tendencies converge, and they will merge in the future.

2

The great pedagogical advantage of Burson's pictures is that they show how such a merger will come about. There is for instance the picture "Lion/Lamb" which is the image of a chimaera which was computed out of pixels of a picture of a lion and of a lamb. All that is necessary is to transcode these pixels into genes, and the creature will soon graze on our meadows and devour our cattle. And then there is the picture "Chimpanzee and Man", which proposes itself as a model for future genetic manipulations. But the most impressive of all is, from this point of view, the picture "Mankind", which, basing itself on population statistics, shows the chimaera of a man who is 57% oriental, 7% black and 36% white. Is this not indeed a prolegomenon for every future eugenics? The cold terror which seizes us when we look at those pictures is due to the fact that they are not only representations of the new mentality, but at the same time models for every future, (and not necessarily merely genetic), computation.

But it is possible to receive Burson's pedagogical message from a different angle. Those pictures show what will result if you dissect already available information, and if you assemble it anew, (no matter whether the information is calculated into pixels, genes, or however). Nothing new will result from it, but only old information, albeit in chimaerical form. Those pictures would be truly creative only if some as yet unavailable information, some "noise", had been introduced into the computation. The pictures say, (as if in negative), that calculation and computation will result in something truly new only if imagination, (fantasy, inspiration, or however you want to call this), is added to it. Burson's pictures are pedagogically valuable precisely because they show that unimaginative calculation and computation will not result in what the heart desires, namely in a world that is not such as it now is, but that is such as it ought to be.

Everything that has been computed from calculations is a chimaera. Burson's pictures show this. Such "true" chimaeras can never again be decomposed. The things that result and that will result from the new mentality can never again be unmade. But Burson's pictures show something else too: they show, (as if in negative), what is essential if the emerging chimerical world is to open new horizons for us and our children. The new mentality must not be permitted to enclose itself into calculation and computation, but it must open itself toward imagination, (toward adventure). If one looks at Burson's pictures in this spirit, hope is again possible: Burson's chimaeras will be followed by other chimaeras which will be open toward adventure, and we, ourselves, will become such chimaeras which open themselves toward that which has never yet existed.