

Rachel Herman: *Imp of Love*

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Light Work

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Just in time for Valentine's Day, the exhibition *Imp of Love* delivers an unexpectedly bittersweet ode to romance. You can put away your rose-colored glasses when looking at these photographs as they start not at the beginning but at the end of humanity's most treasured relationship. The people depicted in Rachel Herman's portraits were once couples but are no longer together. Their reunion in these photographs makes visible another noble human ambition: The tender, sometimes desperate, but always hopeful attempt to transcend a break-up.

Herman often places her subjects on the beach, which provides a sophisticated and visually elegant stage upon which the large and small dramas of the couple's interaction play out. The presence of water in these photographs evokes a persistent, fitting, and unobtrusive metaphor for relationships that are sometimes permanently heading out to sea and sometimes coming back to shore.



Reducing the surrounding environment to metaphor heightens the gestures of the players who interact in this landscape. You are invited to parse the implied meaning of every gaze, flick of the hair, and curl of the lip as well as its possible eventual consequence to building an enduring friendship or sealing it off forever. Hands take on the bulk of this gestural future-casting, as they reach out with the authority of a rescuer who continues to seek through the rubble against all odds or remain in pockets with the resignation of someone who knows that the search has already been called off.

The exhibition, staged by Hannah Frieser, judiciously alternates between large and small prints, which creates a dynamic in the gallery as energetic and emotional as the photographs themselves. The largest prints feature couples who interact more distantly from each other than some, which may leave you with a sense of ambivalent melancholy that seems to totally match the focus of *Imp of Love*.

Imp is not a word that comes up today in casual conversation a lot, unless you happen to work at a daycare. In talking about the work, Herman explains that *imp* most often refers to various iterations of Cupid, who can be either a beloved or a bedeviled spirit. But there is a second meaning to the word that has to do with falconry, one that describes a painful process in which the falconer assists an injured bird to fly again. Here's hoping that the couples in Herman's images either fly again with each other or in a more enriching flock.

Those folks not lucky enough to travel to Syracuse for the exhibition, which runs through March 12, 2010, can enjoy the show by purchasing [Contact Sheet 155](#) from Light Work's online [store](#).

Mary Goodwin is the Associate Director at Light Work in Syracuse, New York.

Light Work was founded in 1973 as a non-profit, artist-run organization. We provide direct support to artists working in the media of photography and digital imaging through residencies, publications, exhibitions, a community-access digital lab facility, and other related projects. www.lightwork.org

