Introduction

*Surreal, Sexy, Sinister* is the first solo exhibition of Berlin photographer Marta Astfalck-Vietz (1901-1993) outside Germany. These 15 reproduction photographs showcase her personal responses to the social, sexual and political transformations that shaped the German metropolis after WWI. Inspired by film and dance, they are mediated realities in which human figures imply the figurative: a black male dancer embraces a white woman, stirring Germany’s fears and fascinations about blackness and the primitive; a woman’s decapitated head conjures gutter-press reports of the grisly stigmata borne by victims of Berlin’s seedy underworld.

Comprising mostly self-portraits, this show is a rich microcosm of creative emotions and gestures: courage, black humor and sexual passion. In Astfalck-Vietz’s erotic images, domestic objects take on a powerful fantasy life – a piece of lace makes her a high society lady, a remote goddess, a masked seductress. She creates erotic moods encompassing dream and loneliness, *joie de vivre* and the mourning of lost love. Berlin, often mythologized as a mercurial woman, is reflected in this romantic, bittersweet array of female fortunes; through it, Marta Astfalck-Vietz makes the city her own.

Almost all her archive was lost when her Berlin home was bombed in 1943. What remains was discovered by curator Janos Frecot in 1989 and is now housed at Berlin’s Berlinische Galerie. Sadly, her original photographs are in bad condition and rarely travel. This show, however, is a precious opportunity to see photographs made of the original photographs. Though a valuable addition to the history of Berlin’s avant-garde, her work has wider significance. It adds a new facet to the practice of female self-portraiture in photography. Like Lady Hawarden before her and Cindy Sherman after, Marta Astfalck-Vietz is model, stylist and creative director in images that provocatively examine the construction of identity. As she once put it: ‘Only when your self is no longer visible, may you be as you are.’

Katherine Tubb, Ph.D.
University of Glasgow