

Lucien Clergue

Throckmorton Fine Art and WESTWOOD GALLERY NYC

These two exhibitions offered very different but complementary views on the work of Lucien Clergue, the much-revered - and still vigorously productive - eminence grise of French photography.

“Clergue in America,” at Throckmorton, focused on the female nudes that have long been a source of Clergue’s fame in this country. All were shot in the last 35 years during his frequent trips to America. Occasionally background glimpses of the New York or Chicago skylines provide a visual counterpoint to the voluptuous curves of a hip or breast. Most striking were the photographer’s so-called *nus zébreés*, in which the model is “clothed” in shadows cast by Venetian blinds. The constant here, as always, is Clergue’s Zenlike concentration on his subject, achieving near-miraculous subtleties of tone and texture.

The exhibition at Westwood was less familiar, with photographs that Jean Cocteau commissioned the then-25-year-old Clergue to make of the filming of *Testament of Orpheus* (1960), Cocteau’s quasi-autobiographical surrealist fantasy about a time-traveling poet. Some of the images take us behind the scenes - such as ones of Cocteau, checking a camera angle in Louis XV attire and relaxing on the set with Yul Brynner and Picasso, both of whom had cameo roles. There was also a hilarious sport of two hunky young men in spotted Speedos (part of their “dog-men” costumes) on lunch break.

Other images looked at first like stills from the movie (which played on a monitor in the gallery) but were not. One records the scene in which Cocteau walks alongside a white-plumed sphinx.

The film was shot at eye level, but Clergue opted for a low angle, creating the illusion that both figures are airborne, with the sphinx extending a protective wing over Cocteau’s shoulder. No doubt Cocteau, never shy about an opportunity for self-apotheosis, loved it.

- Elizabeth Wilson



Lucien Clergue
Jean Cocteau and the Sphinx, 1959
gelatin silver print, 12" x 16", Westwood