

“Woman!”

November 1-December 20, 2008

The Center for Modern Psychoanalytic Studies
and
The New York Graduate School of Psychoanalysis
16 West Tenth Street
New York, New York 10011

Curator's Essay

Woman! is a national juried exhibition representing the work of 51 artists selected by artist/psychoanalyst Dan Gilhooley from the work of 218 artists from across the country. Forty of the artists in the show are woman, so to a significant degree this show is comprised of work by early and mid-career female artists who see gender or sexuality as central esthetic concerns.

Woman is arguably the most ubiquitous image in western art history. From the prehistoric *Venus of Willendorf* to Cindy Sherman's contemporary photographic reinventions of herself, images of women dominate art history. In large part, the prominence of woman as subject reflects the prominence of man as art-maker. Seen through this male lens, women have been traditionally presented as objects of desire. This traditional male perspective continues to dominate popular capitalist culture where images of half-naked women are sexual commodities used to sell products; their pictures become the grease that spins the wheels of commerce. Against this masculine backdrop the current exhibition of art made mostly by and about women offers a decidedly different perspective, particularly in the areas of beauty and intimate relationships. This essay will focus on a group of sixteen artists in the show who address these two themes.

Traditional representations of feminine beauty and the theme of “woman as desired object” are masterfully presented by three male artists in the show. **Sabin Howard's** life-sized sculpture “Aphrodite” references classical Renaissance themes of idealized physical beauty embodied in the ultimate object of sexual desire, the goddess of love herself. Howard's careful and sustained craftsmanship pursues a form of perfection, heightening and idealizing the beauty of his model. **Daniel Dallmann's** portrait in oil, “Roberta Della Luna,” lovingly depicts a sensuous bare-shouldered white-haired woman. The warm colors of her flesh seem to speak of deep emotional warmth between the subject and artist. **Nicholas Jacques' oil painting**, “Lines of Sight,” portrays a young woman with her arms folded across her chest, looking away from the artist, who seems as remote and impenetrable as the building seen out the window to her left. In this case, the lines of sight—the artist's and hers—seem at the moment to be poignantly misaligned. Nonetheless, she appears to remain the object of his desire.

But when women represent themselves or other women, beauty and desire are treated differently. Here one often feels the pressure to offer the world a beautiful appearance, and to measure up. **Judi Krew's** acrylic painting, "Botox to Block, Please," comically presents women's attempts to undo aging, and recover their lost youthful attractiveness. Rather than being beautiful, Krew's women are savagely exaggerated caricatures of glamour. **Lauren Schiller's** small oil, "Feed/Shame," presents a nostalgic look at a young woman (in the 1950s?) on the cusp of adulthood standing half-dressed before us, wearing only underpants and pearls. On the wall behind her are a set of numerals suggesting she has grown to just over five feet in height. On the right side of the picture are four scenes of a woman preparing pastries: donuts, muffins, and cookies. The young girl's eyes are covered (like the woman atop the scales of justice) suggesting she is blind to something, but the design of the picture makes her the fulcrum balancing between satisfying sweats and the need to measure up. Schiller's title of "Feed/Shame" suggests an emerging conflict: satisfying sustenance supplied by her mother gives her shame to eat as an adult.

In several pieces the conception of beauty shifts from adherence to an ideal physical type to presentations of women that are uniquely personal and transcendent. In **Mare Vaccaro's** stunning self-portrait photograph, "Memories," she presents herself in a black evening gown with a pearl necklace and matching earrings, her gloved hand touching her throat as her eyes gaze downward; sunlight through lace curtains cast ornate shadows across her face and bald head. What happened to her hair? Vaccaro has a form of autoimmune alopecia that makes her unable to grow hair, one of woman's traditionally most feminine attributes. Her clothing, jewelry, and the lace curtain contrast with the absence of hair causing the viewer to question the source and meaning of femininity. Her black dress, downcast eyes, her missing hair, even the title "Memories" all suggest enduring loss. In this picture Vaccaro's beauty comes from her unique individuality and her transcendent humanness; here beauty is both spiritual and physical. **Sara Lewis's** photograph, "Brenda Reclining," depicts an African-American woman reclining on a Rococo chaise lounge with a print on the wall above her showing black female labors "slaving" away at various forms of piecework. Brenda has "arrived," self-assured and free, a powerful feminine force to be reckoned with. As in the Vaccaro photo, endurance and transcendence become components of an emotionally complex beauty that emphasizes the individual rather than conformance to an ideal standard.

A second obvious theme of the show is interpersonal relationships. **Salvatore Scrivo's** raucous mixed media relief sculpture, "Adam and Eve before their Expulsion from the Garden," shows the two protagonists entwined, linked together through mutual anxiety and recognition of the disaster that awaits them. Many pictures depict male/female conflict. **Becky Steven's** hand-woven tapestry, "Try to see it my Way," places a man and woman face-to-face, nose-to-nose in confrontation: the carefully woven threads emphasizing how intractable, irreversible, even eternal the stand-off is. **Kasey Hembel's** humorous photograph "Duties," has a young woman in a party dress sitting on a kitchen countertop leaning over a stove as she fries the head of the man who has presumably stood her up. **Rachel James's** photograph, "I promise you I was There," comes from her series *Living with Borderline Personality Disorder*. (The artist points out

that 75% of BPD diagnoses are for women.) James' photograph combines an image of a random, tangled, disconnected cable abandoned on a floor with the text:

I wake every morning, and think of you
Which makes me smile, until I remember
I'm the last thing on your mind.

perfectly representing how painful, irrepressible, and ultimately isolating her feelings are. **Ken Morgan's** small mixed media painting, "Girls, Girls," provides a male counterpart to these feelings of isolation and depression. Morgan's elegantly elemental depiction of the zippered entrance to a peep show, with its black, scratchy, "dirty" surface, suggests that a dark, isolating depression is the natural reciprocal to the sexual excitement offered by girls, girls. Alternatively, Morgan's painting can be interpreted as the "lights going out on the peep show." Because the artist grew up as a member of an acrobatic circus family, he knew the female entertainers who lost employment through the demise of circus peep shows.

Two pictures represent the relationship between mother and daughter, one depicting a unified family of women across generations, the other showing a woman's attempt to build a bridge back to a mother who had left her. **Karen Jordan's**, "The Kiosk," shows a mother with three daughters, and their grandmother, gathered together at an outdoor souvenir stand in Venice. Through their similar dress, shared activity, and descending size Jordan suggests the transmission of feminine knowledge and values across generations within a single unified family. By contrast, in a mixture of humor and poignancy, **Adele Mills'** piece, "Words are merely References to Something not Present," is a letter authored by a woman to Mrs Alex Katz. The "unidentified" writer, having seen Mrs Katz's painted picture, asks Mrs Katz if she can temporarily borrow her painted image to use as her mother until she finds a real photograph of the woman who had given her up for adoption.

Finally, several pieces treat the theme of sexual attraction, of luring or repulsing male sexual interest. **Naomi Shersty's** video, "Essayer; Tenter (to try; to tempt)," depicts the young artist repeatedly mimicking the sultry, seductive movements of a dancer from a 1960s French film—a real "sexual goddess" of Marilyn Monroe proportion. As the young understudy compares her own tentative movements to those of her accomplished model, she awkwardly and comically practices the art of sexual seduction. **Kerianne Quick's** small sculpture addresses gender politics in the workplace. "There is no Sex in Secretary" is comprised of two sets of four typewriter keys that together make up the central "home row" of the keyboard. As the accompanying photos demonstrate, when the collection of keys is worn together as brooches on the front of the young woman's dress—over her breasts—it's clear that her fingers can touch those keys and breasts, but her employer's can not.

The exhibition is open for public viewing Wednesday through Thursday, noon to 3:00 p.m., and by appointment by calling 212-260-7050. Additionally, a slide show of the exhibition can be viewed at www.cmps.edu.