

*Women  
Painters:  
Gender Identity and  
the Integration of  
Paint into Feminism*

BY JOEL SILVERSTEIN

**B**Y THE TIME THE STOCK MARKET CRASHED IN 1987, Neo-expressionism, indeed painting itself, had run its course. Big investors fled in droves due to lack of ready cash. There was a sense of boredom, insecurity within the whole artworld. Both male and female artists were forced to re-evaluate what they were doing. Fearful yet competent painters, switched styles quickly. By the early 90s, other modes of expression, like installations and ready-mades had come to the fore. I had never heard so many people mutter "Maybe I'll do a video." It was like rats leaving a sinking ship.

At about the same time, there was another movement within the art world - the force of Feminism emanating from academia. The dominant rhetoric of the time was that painting was anathema to women because it had been a bastion of the masculine power structure and the parlance of dead white males. I remember attending two such exhibitions from this period, circa 1990. It was already post-Barbara Kruger/Cindy Sherman. One exhibition, held in a informal loft space in Williamsburg, consisted of a pair of women's briefs stitched with names. The viewer was instructed to peruse the article of clothing using a jeweler's monocle. Afterwards, the artist confided to me that drawing and painting held no interest for her and writing was her draughtsmanship.

At a similar exhibition in SoHo, a young woman showed a pair of designer jeans encased in paraffin. When questioned, the artist rattled off something from pioneer semiotician, psychoanalyst and feminist Julia Kristeva. Whether I thought these were fully rounded works of art was irrelevant. These women did. They both felt that painting could not express their experiences as women, that beyond conceptualized ready-mades in a Duchampian mode, the closest they wanted to get to the hand's gesture was their own cursive penmanship.

Kristeva wrote, "Postmodernism comes in only to deconstruct notions of a subject beyond categories of gender. Women as such do not exist. She is in the process of becoming." This can be said of painting as well. It is the confluence of these two movements, women evolving within the artworld and a resurgent interest in painting, that has produced the most interesting work in recent memory. Of course, it is unlikely that painting will recapture the primacy that it once enjoyed. There will always be artists besides those who paint. There always have been, at least within the modernist period, strong, even brilliant women. But there ever has been a time when more women are painting, directly confronting it's history and making it relevant to their own experience.

Sometimes this means absorbing a traditional language, or participating in a contemporary one. Either way art is enriched, because the woman artist is relating to a body of information with a different identity, enlarging the dialogue in healthy pluralist ways or in subversive individualist ones.

**T**HERE IS A WONDERFUL EXHIBITION AT DC Moore titled *The Likeness of Being*. Curated by Judith E. Stein, it consists of self-portraits by sixty women. It has an early closing date (February 5) for full review in this issue, so I will mention it only in passing. It boasts a stellar roster of creative personalities, including: Yvonne Jacquette, Judy Chicago, Mary Frank, Daisy Youngblood, Susan Rothenberg, Nicole Eisenman, Barbara Zucker and Audrey Flack. A healthy number of the represented artists are older women, in direct contrast to current gallery practice. The exhibition mirrors a profound respect for their observations at any stage of the life cycle. There are women of color represented, as well as artists who are not well known. It's a diverse group of participants, representing a broad definition of the term self-portrait, comparable to William Rubin's, when he curated the Picasso portraits at MoMA in 1996.

Jeanne Silverthorn offers a latex casting in an ornate black oval frame, while Susanna Coffey has submitted her typical tonal-pointillist exploration regarding the typology of her own face. What is especially noticeable in Ms. Stein's curatorial effort is the lack of rhetoric. Beyond what one might call traditional epistemological philosophic inquiries, the message was not emblazoned on the walls, sandblasted on to benches or even stitched into quilts. It has been absorbed and embedded into the process of art making. It's part of who these women are; they don't have to spell it out. There's an impetus and an energy which crosses over and infects each work. Ms. Stein obviously saw the relationships, even though the formal disparities in these works are great. It's also a tribute to the artists, whose fecundity makes you question how they will evolve and grow until they reach a final stage of expression as octogenarians. Short of uttering a Yiddish blessing, it is a rare exhibition that actually makes you feel and wonder about the participants involved.

**L**EHMAN MAUPIN GALLERY IS CURRENTLY showing the works of the Brazilian artist Adriana Varejão. Varejão lives and works in Rio de Janeiro and makes painted constructions based on the confluence of

three cultures: Asia, America, Europe. This legacy defines her Latin heritage in general, and her own identity in particular. Brazil had ties to the former Portuguese colony of Macau in Southern China. This region in Asia exported techniques and patterns for making porcelain tiles and tattoos. These, in turn, were wholeheartedly adopted by the Portuguese colonists living in Brazil. Another chapter in Brazil's history, darker and more problematic, was the suppression, conversion and partial extermination of local Native American tribes. Some of whom were actually cannibals.

The artist examines her own inheritance and culpability within a tripartite cultural identity. For example, this colorful gustatory past is mimicked and paralleled by the Christian concept of the Eucharist offered by well meaning Euro-centric priests. If the patterns stamped on porcelain china mark a benign domesticity, the kind women traditionally administered, it covers a gaping wound of the repressed pagan "other." It's an eradicated alternative history, one whose suppression and extinction was celebrated by the newly formed, blended culture of Brazil.

Varejão makes thick, three-dimensional reliefs using canvas, porcelain, wood, aluminum and oil paint. They are structures using faux, painted patterns derived from traditional designs. Rips or gouges figure prominently, evoking both historical and personal trauma. It's a fundamental response to a burden of the past, which has been torn, kicking and screaming, into the present. The material within the wounds are sculpted and painted with horror movie conviction: blood, guts, viscera, shit. Painted red-brown, it's stomach turning and shiny.

Two other elements complete the iconography. Blank canvases denote the act of creativity or are merely used as conceptual props. The image of the ocean is also present and is rendered weightless and free. A vision of the water ties directly into Brazil's maritime heritage, while also doubling as communal transcendence. *MARGEM (EDGE) 1999*, is comprised of twenty panels. White canvases like so many movie screens overlap with repetitive images of the ocean. The rectangles are tangentially projected between the voids, forming one massive polymorphic shape that hovers with the conviction of spiritual belief.

Similarly, *EQUATORIAL LINE III, 1999* is an oil-and-canvas construction, held together by strips that run lyre and harp-like from ceiling to floor. Rapunzel's tresses or unruly unstrung veins come to mind, hanging like so many vestiges or memories. Similar to Anselm Kiefer's massive painting, *OSIRIS UND ISIS 1985/87*, the strings and

plate shards serve as foreign material ready for surgical removal within a vast mythological body.

These physically heavy works have the visual complexity of altar pieces within the Hispanic Baroque tradition. The tripartite cultural heritage of Asia, Europe and Latin America become easily conflated with the earth, heaven and hell of the Christological cosmos. The earth, represented by the fired clay and decorative patterns of the porcelain tiles, is ripped asunder to reveal the chaotic bloody mass of the underworld. This is signified by savaged internal organs, the dark native origins rooted in the flesh. Floating triumphantly are the waves and implied sky, usual Romantic stand-ins for sublimity and heaven.

In contemporary terms, the philosophy of Michel Foucault informs us of a decentered dialogue of violence imprinted on the body and implicated by the voices of power. It is literally inscribed the way Varejão copies tattoos and tile patterns.

The dangers and seductions of judging an artist from another cultural milieu are great. Can we judge her fairly, or are we merely responding to a prescribed codex of prejudices? Granted this artist is a powerful constructor and maker of objects, but, in point of fact, she may be overly informed regarding gallery-curated, international Postmodernism. Several artist come to mind. The pattern paintings of Joyce Kosloff, the 80's photographs of Cindy Sherman, the excrement and urine filled vitrines of half-a-dozen people, the broken plates of you-know-who.

Varejão's painting style is neutral and unemphatic. Neutrality has a long history stretching back from Manet to Velasquez and may carry a charge, especially when juxtaposed against the overly explicit effects of violence. Perhaps this is adequate for depictions of tiles, but her seascapes are blandly described, her blood overly so. It's as if all this incredible material has been cleaned up for international consumption. Perhaps Varejão, a strong artist, needs to get closer to her subject matter in a painterly manner that doesn't appeal to our current political presumptions or aesthetic predilections. If you can ignore all the preaching to the converted, it's a strong exhibition.

**C**ECILY BROWN, A YOUNG BRITISH PAINTER currently living in New York, is showing at Gagosian Gallery in SoHo. She is a few years younger than the current *Sensation* bratpack, but her work bears some parallels to them in scale and attitude. Brown's paintings are

enormous. Seven measure 100 inches, while one is a mere shrimp at seventy-five. They're like heavy-weight boxers at an edgy title fight, where the purse is large and the crowd has just become ugly. And that's only for starters.

Brown is the daughter of art historian David Sylvester, although she did not know this until the age of twenty one. Her works display an appetite for the painters of the past that is voracious. Her subject matter is in keeping with current tastes; however her love of painting, expression and epistemological vestige is essentially unironic, rendering them flavor different than the usual gallery fare.

Her work is based on sex, but not just the experience of sex. It's more like sex in art as depicted by a series of the big boys: de Kooning, Baselitz and Bacon. Brown begins a work by making drawings. These drawings are based on pornographic source materials: Victorian engravings, paintings, contemporary skin magazines. These drawings are more realistic, almost illustrative. They serve as her point of origin, similar to de Kooning's work process, who used observations from life, mannequins, reflections in a mirror or, later, drawings from television. Brown uses multiple source materials within a single painting, shaped into shifting patterns of perception.

There is ample room for several hacked-up, coalescing figures to engage in all sorts of acts. The kind of positions that figure prominently in porno magazines are here skillfully shifted into equal areas of figuration and abstraction. A pair of hands clench. Knees bend; legs splay in utter abandon. The figures are also theatrically posed, but waves of attachment and disengagement alternate. There is a flux of paint which describes and undoes. Tangents of conjunction are perceptually clear and eroticized, while analogous areas are practically inchoate, rendered confusing as if on purpose.

They have the weight of big studio machines of past epochs, but her slashing brush work keeps the material moving. In a way, her work is related to Jenny Saville's: big, tarted-up, English studio pictures in gray, brown and yellow with globs of a hop-headed panavision pink doubling for flesh. Brown is not fascinating as an innovator or master of technique. As enjoyable as the paintings are, they sometimes overproduce effect and strain at overwhelming the viewer. Taking on de Kooning and Bacon at a young age is admirable, but is bound to yield mixed results despite the gallery hype. What is fascinating and totally worthwhile is that the artist came to a body of knowledge concerning sex, the body,

Expressionism, Existentialism and set herself to create a relational identity to it. De Kooning created a certain language for his *Woman* series in the 1950's and 60's. He was bound by his psyche, his attitudes towards women, his fear of sex, his mother, Marilyn Monroe or any interpretation you care to give. If Brown merely absorbed these attitudes as stylistic posturing, she would have unconsciously internalized a legacy of self-hatred, and good old boy misogyny. But here the artist displays her intelligence at every turn. Of course, as a woman, her relation to female identity and sex is different than the male artists under consideration.

Brown shares a sympathy with the current Feminist interest in pornography that renders her paintings contemporary, but Brown's identity is more hermeneutic and interpretive. She's found a way to resuscitate a lot of painting material recently deemed used up. This artist is perhaps only a footnote to a tradition, but one that has a chance of turning tradition on its ear.

The analogy is to Robert Colescott, an African American who looks to Picasso. Picasso may have been mired in French colonialism and prejudice, but Cubism is still seminal to Colescott. It's the edge of this sword that has given Colescott his figurative content and his formal language.

Brown's work is professed not to center on a Feminist message. She assumes that any woman with a brain is a Feminist, and this no longer need be the starting point (her own words paraphrased). The boy's club has been breached, but as long as the doors are open, why not use the house as she sees fit?

The sixty-odd women at DC Moore may differ in their ages, their relationships to painting, identity and to Feminism itself. But one thing is clear. Currently, we are not in an era of great formal or stylistic discovery. The epoch of Modernism is still producing aftershocks and memorial services masked as ennui. It's no mystery or surprise that painting is back (for the millionth time), or that women are engaged in this particular studio practice making important contributions. If painting is to survive at all, it must engage in a cultural re-contextualization process in order to create a relational identity from its existing facets. In short, it's time to regroup. This is something that women know on a fundamental level because of their own history and can teach their male counterparts a thing or two. It's a vital sign, an encouraging process regarding the well-being of a sometimes fragile art form.

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