

POST *porn* ISM

ARTIST CINDY WORKMAN'S SMART-SLASH-SEXY WAY OF LOOKING AT THE WHOLE WOMEN-AS-OBJECT THING. BY GRADY TURNER

Cindy Workman was raised to be a proper young lady on New York City's Upper East Side. She was supposed to go to debutante balls, then settle down with a rich husband and make babies. Instead, she became an artist who questions the whole notion that women should have assigned roles in life. Maybe the Upper East Side lost a Stepford Wife, but the downtown arts scene gained a smart social critic.

Workman is a young collage artist who takes images from popular culture and juxtaposes them to bring out society's assumptions about women. Her work is really fun to look at-- campy vintage pornography, cowboy comic books, and vapid nature illustrations are combined in large, slick sculptures that hang on walls like grand scale paintings. If there were a soundtrack, it might be Cibo Matto. But get out the Hole and Portishead too. Because Workman's art has a serious subtext: these campy images reflect how women have been defined by images a male-dominated society, and how these stereotypes continue to impact the self-image of young women. We talked one evening during Workman's recent exhibition at Lennon, Weinberg Gallery in New York, looking at her art while she suppressed the urge to smoke.

Grady Turner: Lets talk about the two large works in which pinups and pornographic images overlaid by illustrations of fruit or birds. Why this juxtaposition?

Cindy Workman: I think that all of this concerns women being objectified. The most obvious one may be *S/M Nude*, the one with a woman's back covered by a peach: she is like a ripe piece of fruit to be eaten, consumed, plucked off a tree. You know-- a commodity available for the asking.



S/M Nude

GT: The fruit just covers her ass and lower back, and she looks at us over her shoulders. What is she doing in that position?

CW: I think she's having knowledge of the other art. That picture was taken at a time when *Playboy* didn't exist yet. They took provocative shots to invite you to fantasize, to welcome you into the scenario. She's displaying herself as if to say, 'Come hither.'

GT: In the *Woman as Object* image, is the model the pinup legend, Betty Page, who is so popular these days?



Woman as Object 1

CW: No. I know it looks like her, but it's not. I actually think she looks like Elizabeth Taylor.

GT: As Cleopatra.

CW: I really like that model.

GT: Do you now who she is?

CW: No, I don't. I've used her in a few things, and it's all from the same layout. Again, she is very beautiful, but to say that reduces her to beauty, as an object. I'm certainly not the first person to point this out, but in art history this has been done forever and ever. Women have always been objects in art.

Here, she is a flower. Flowers are important to me-- I use them as a motif a lot. There is a layering in this work. The flower petal over her eyes is like a mask, suggesting intrigue or provocation. It is formally organized, but it's true of the content, too. I should say that I was trained as a minimal painter-- that's what I was going to do.

GT: Before you were distracted.

CW: I was sidetracked. I had more fun making collage.

GT: Did you combine these images on a computer?

CW: No. See, I just got a computer. Making these would have been easier and cheaper. I work small-- I assemble collages on a small scale they decide which ones I want to see bigger.

GT: The nature images are the kind of thing that might decorate a suburban home.

CW: Or even a Park Avenue home. Everybody has them, whether in the basement or the attic or on the wall. I was just at a neighbor's house, and she has some.

GT: And the pornographic images come from 1940s and 1950s men's stag magazines?

CW: Yeah, skanky magazines. I'm very good at amassing these images.

GT: Your work space must be stacked with vintage pornography.

CW: It's actually very organized, because there is so much that I draw from. I use a lot of little teeny art, and if it's not organized you can't find anything. There are so many resources.



Woman as Object 14

GT: Why do you use pinups and pornography from that era?

CW: I think there is more romanticism. And there is something about the quality of the image that I like. Most importantly, at that time, women were idealized in a way that doesn't exist now. Then, women growing up looked to magazines or TV or movies as models they would aspire to, what they would physically want to look like and act like. Today, people are in rehab-- those models are gone, everything has run amok.

My point is that even though we are told we can do anything, we really can't... there is still a very strong cookie-cutter mentality about what women can be. Back then, it was very dictated. In that time, you knew what was expected of you. The women in these pictures are going against that, and people did reject that.

Today, people are appalled about Clinton, but of course he's screwing around-- he's a man! You know what I mean?

GT: The Clinton scandal doesn't surprise anyone. Whether it's true or false, it's completely believable. Everyone expects older powerful men to have affairs with younger women.

CW: I suppose that in that era presidents were doing it too, but we didn't need to know it. There was a sense of decorum, of what was right and proper. That is how I was raised. My mother was into having the gloves, and the purse and the pumps that match. I was raised to get a husband and have babies. Of course, neither my sister nor I have done that, while the kids of my parents' peers have. Because I was raised to do this, so I'm intrigued by it. Very much.

GT: Are you intrigued by the underside of that dream?



Special Occasion Flower 4

CW: The underside of that is essentially my reality. But it has always existed, so I'm intrigued by these stereotypes, which are very pervasive. And I'm intrigued because I think everyone plays into them, resents them, likes them-- you know, it's a double-edged sword. Women sometimes coo to get something, then resent the fact that they have to do it. It's definitely something I run into, and so I spew it out in my art.

GT: When you talk about the models in the pornography you appropriate, you don't seem to be referring to them as images, but as people.

CW: Well, they are representational. I mean, I don't sit at home constructing fantasy lives for them. But yeah, they are women. I wonder: what brought this woman to pose like she was going to be whipped? If people had known at that time that this was what she did for money, she would have been shunned. But then of course, if you were married you could do that for your husband and no one would say boo.

GT: Because *S/M Nude* is set in a living room, I can't be sure her husband didn't take the picture at home. It is very amateurish.

CW: That was typical of the pornography of that time. They were little snapshots. Women might be hired for a job, and they would meet photographers in a rented house or hotel room, and they took off their clothes and did the shoot. You are seeing exactly what it is.

GT: I don't know much about the history of pornography, but I've seen stag films from that era that are similar to what you describe. There is typically unedited footage of a single naked woman rolling around on a couch or bed, with no music or dialogue or hint of intercourse. The films seemed innocent, almost like sex had not been invented yet.



Special Occasion Flower 5

CW: I'm shocked. There is a sex museum in Amsterdam-- it's OK, but it's totally heterosexual sex-- that had copies of the first movies ever made, and they were doing exactly what is done today. Of course film was different then, so you might see a woman tied to railroad tracks and jerky animation and so on. But the disrobing, the humping, whatever-- it was all the same. And that surprised me, given what we are taught about Victorian morals. Everything was supposed be so laced up, but it wasn't.

I suppose those suppositions are built into this work. What is expected of us, versus what we are really like. You know, men see this work and are excited by it, and I find that intriguing. For me, this work is not about pornography, but about control. Or the loss of control. Certainly, when you get into these images of people who are bound and gagged, that's all about control. They have no voice.



Daisy Nude

GT: Although there is a distinction between being a participant in the picture and being a person looking at the picture. I mean, what if the picture of the submissive woman was made by her husband? What if she enjoyed this kind of S/M eroticism? As a viewer, I may be applying my own moral judgment if I am appalled by that. Maybe the woman being gagged is more comfortable with her position than I am. So perhaps this judgment of control comes from the viewer.

CW: It is from the viewer. I do agree. But I think voluntary or not, whether she has done it for fun or for a photo shoot, our response as a viewer is: this woman is gagged. Now why is she gagged? I don't want to get on a soapbox, but in art too, women have not had as much of a voice as men. And certainly I haven't had a voice. As most artists would say, my art is a way to let things out or sort through issues you encounter in your personal life.

It is very intertwined, and to break down the components is hard. The components don't necessarily exist on their own. But added together in a collage, they raise really provocative questions. Now I'm going to get a cigarette--I don't suppose that's OK, but I want one.