



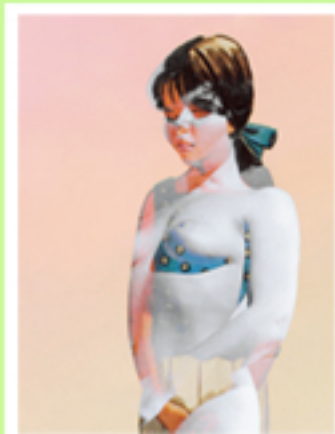
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REVIEWS OF ART IN THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA AND BEYOND

tuesday, february 27, 2007

Multiple Takes on The Art of Cindy Workman



TIM CAMPBELL

Cindy Workman's most recent prints are currently on view at Lennon Weinberg Gallery through March 3. The show delivers a series of fully-realized, single edition digital prints whose conceptual strengths work fantastically in nuanced, complex composite-images of women. The body of work addresses issues of identity, gender, sexualized imagery, and the difficulties of person-to-person interaction that go hand-in-hand with these issues.

Upon entering the gallery, several large prints are mounted to the east side behind plexiglass that is bolted to the wall. Further back in the gallery space, similar prints are displayed in plain white frames. All of the prints combine a variety of imagery from dolls, floral cloth patterns, magazine advertisements and pornography to create highly edited constructions of women. Like many other great prints and paintings, Workman shows how the best visual strategies are simple on the surface but full of intense complexity and struggle underneath.

The use of plexiglass brought to mind issues of transparency. As viewers, what are we seeing through? Are we seeing through social constructions of gender and recognizing their theatrical aspects, or are we seeing the constructions themselves and thus rendering the individuals behind them transparent? I left the gallery feeling that this question was not resolved in the work, but that it was intentionally left to the viewer to think about.

In many of the prints, such as "Woman 12," Workman cuts and enlarges images of breasts from pornography and contrasts this enlargement with a shrunken head, whose outline is derived from either advertisement or a doll. This distortion is highly suggestive and puts the viewer in a position of discomfort because Workman is clearly referencing a predatory, sexualizing gaze directed towards women. In this piece, the head is disproportionately small, pushed back in space, and forced to confine to the outlines of an ideal shape. The mouth is blurred as though the words that issue from it are something to be skipped over, hushed. Some type of close-fitting band constricts the throat. Meanwhile, magnified breasts rendered in high grayscale relief occupy the entire lower third of the print.

The print "Large Woman 10" takes on an equally tragic tone in its discussion of childhood, growing up, and the difficulty of dealing with changing social expectations. Between the doll-like image of a young girl chasing butterflies and the soft-core porno image that dwells inside of the girl's dress, there seems to be no chance of relief for this person in both childhood and adulthood; social constructions, expectations, and sexualization impose at every age.

The most impressive aspect of these prints is their ability to evade definition and question themselves without losing any of their stunning visual presence. Are we looking at investigations of assigned identity, at collages of social projections of gender, or are these prints supposed to be portraits of specific individuals who must struggle with social projections, gender, and sexualization, while maintaining their own unique identity? Incredibly, the prints do all of these at once without leaving any slack behind.

What really drove these images home for me was how Workman pushed the imagery out of the realm of cold theory than can isolate viewers from highly conceptual artwork, without sacrificing any of the conceptual strength that dictated the composite arrangements. These prints are not actually collage or assemblage because they are pure-image; various images were cut and edited together on a computer and then printed digitally. None of the original material upon which the fragments were printed is included. This fuses the fragments together into a newly synthesized whole, and it lends a cohesive power to each composite image. Furthermore, Workman chose to place these images upon blank backgrounds (with the exception of an occasional butterfly). The combination of a cohesive image and a blank background pushed these prints surprisingly close to a more traditional genre: portraiture. This is what really gave the imagery a lot of power; the suggestion that the viewer might actually be looking at a portrait of an individual, a person with a specific background. The images are not just composites and clips of information; they have a strong visual and figurative presence that compels the viewer to consider each woman-image as a person here in front of them. Workman's ability to keep the viewer guessing about where the social constructions come from, or who assigns them, only makes the work more affective

and challenging. This highly successful show is certainly worth a visit as it will engage the viewer on multiple levels and its message stays with the viewer after leaving.

CORY OBERNDORFER

In a masterful play of dichotomies, Cindy Workman balances images of the innocent and the experienced, the playful and the playgirl, the naïve and the voyeuristic, and the metamorphosis between the two.

Her most recent show at Lennon, Weinberg, Inc. in New York's Chelsea District is titled "Les Demoiselles", an obvious reference to Picasso's "Les Demoiselles d'Avignon" (The Ladies of Avignon). Picasso's painting depicts five prostitutes in a brothel and receives a great deal of attention due to the use of multiple styles in the same painting. For Picasso, this painting documents a transition period in his work. For Workman, it's the ladies themselves that are caught in a transitional period.

Workman gathers her images from a number of sources. The idealized drawings of girls come from the envelopes of sewing patterns, clad in bows, ribbons, simple frocks and plain hairstyles. The soft-core nudes are obtained from photographs, publications and online sources. They offer breasts, inviting looks and the occasional accent of kink. The artist has then her sources and collaged them using computer technology and transitions in opacity and transparency. I am still unsure how these transitions should be viewed. Upon first look, it seemed that the child and adult fought for attention and dominance within the same figure. But after further viewing, the subtle transitions and overlays blend these archetypes together with an odd sense of harmony, creating a new hybrid. The hybrid idea is reflected with the occasional appearance of butterflies in her prints.

In each piece, we are witness to the physical and sexual transition. The bodies of the young girls blossom immediately into curvaceous women, fully aware of their sexuality yet sometimes still displaying shyness by covering their genitals. As viewers, we experience a metamorphosis of our own. Watching a young child at play is such an innocent activity, but seeing the adult nude in sexual poses is voyeuristic. But in actuality, the traditions of voyeurism are reversed here. The children are unaware of the viewer and are often found at play in their own world. We have stumbled across a candid moment. The adults pose full frontal or in ways that are hyper-aware of the viewer and invite the gaze. In which situation should we feel like the peeping tom?

Workman has also made a deliberate choice to cull her images from a specific time period. By using work created in or around the 1950's, she recalls a time when gender and age roles were more strictly defined and crossing those lines was taboo. The dated material also provides color palettes for Workman to manipulate. The adult nudes are presented in black & white or muted sepia tones. The children are rendered with pastel colors found in children's clothing or candies. The transition in palettes takes place within the figures as well as the neutral backgrounds.

While standards of propriety may have been clearly defined in the 50's, the lines have been

blurred. We now live in a time when children mature at a younger age and are inundated with images of a sexualized culture. At what point should we let go of innocence? What are the implications of the transition from virgin to whore? Can the two identities exist simultaneously? Should we enjoy the playfulness in Cindy Workman's pieces or feel like a voyeuristic pervert? Can't we have both?

MAXWELL O. PERRY

Cindy Workman's show was the first of a few shows that I was really impressed with on my recent trip to New York. I was not familiar with her work so that made it all the more impressive in its freshness. Her pieces are large scale ink-jet prints (most likely giclee) which appear as layered transparencies of various body parts of women, juxtaposed together to form one powerful image usually frontal with strange cropping within each layered image to accentuate the whole being the sum of the parts. The individual images come from a wide range of sources – soft core, sewing patterns, children's books, etc. Each individual image, through its construction with the others, takes on the history of the portrayal of women in the media as well as how women portray themselves to reveal the complexity of identity. It is also significant that the women are made up of varying ages, the little girl's face in transposed with the full breasted female of a men's magazine. The act of juxtaposition references politics and time in these pieces as they seem to tell the story of themselves. They reference narrative without being narrative in nature. There are also signifiers within the images. One woman wears a bondage collar, while another holds a flower. Each one identifying and addressing stereotype and archetype while not being stereotypical in any way. The nudity in these images serves their politics as well, at once they are both exposing themselves and being revealed, but because of their construction, do not come off as pornographic but rather simply provocative. The use of the scanner and computer could be seen as a crutch, however the artist's use here separates these images from being simple pop art and transforms them, giving them an extremely modern look. It is interesting in reading the press release for the show that Workman's style developed from forms of direct collage and fully realized narrative to arrive at these striking images.