

## THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASSES

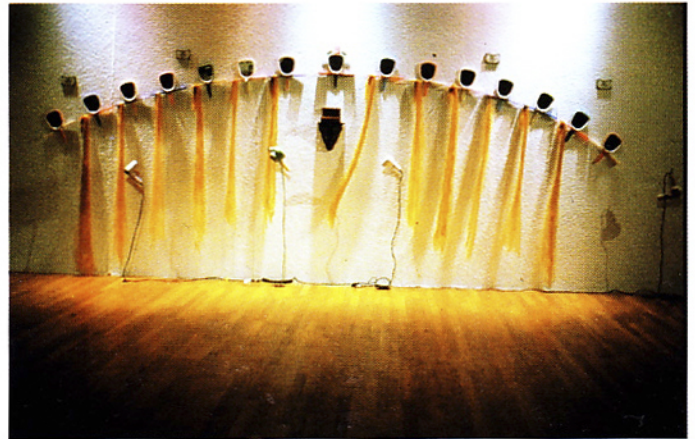
By Beth Goldberg

Issues of identity continue to occupy a major position in contemporary art discourse. Having been prematurely interrupted and eclipsed by the flurry of, among other things, mostly male “heroic” painting in the 1980s, women artists in particular have felt a need to exert and examine their identities in the visual arts. The discussion on female identity that was so powerfully introduced in art of the '60s and '70s is now being pursued and expanded upon by many female artists and critics.

This group of exhibitions poignantly expressed the vulnerability of both men and women to dominant society's often repressive formulas for identity. In some cases there was a focus on reclaiming one's own inherent strength and beauty. But for the most part it was a lonely proposition. These exhibitions lacked a sense of the individual's potential for moving beyond an isolated state towards a greater connection with others and the larger world. Still, the artists in these shows effectively used a range of approaches to expose, confront and defy culturally determined imperatives of identity. A major two-part exhibition, “Mirror, Mirror: Gender Roles and the Historical Significance of Beauty”, addressed identity as related to cultural definitions of beauty and desirability. One of the most powerful pieces in the show, also *Mirror, Mirror*, by Stephanie Johnson exposed the potentially destructive effects of white, Eurocentric standards of beauty imposed on Black women. Johnson arranged hand mirrors, large-toothed “afro” pick combs and advertising slogans for hair straightener against the wall in the shape of a large altar. Hanging from this arch, long strands of frizzy hair were blown incessantly by a dryer hanging below. In this context the dryer operated on at least two levels. First, its incessant noise was irritating and repetitive, like the message of conformity black women get from the mass media and society at large. Second, the continual stream of dry air suggested that the hair would finally shrivel and dry up, thanks to this relentless squelching of natural beauty.

This metaphoric device acted shrewdly in consort with the altar formation. Cultural standards of beauty are like a monolithic altar. In order to reap the supposed rewards, we must obey and pay homage to this “religion,” even if it means destroying a part of ourselves in the process. Not surprisingly, the altar configuration was

“Mirror, Mirror...Gender Roles and the Historical Significance of Beauty,” Part I at the Oliver Art Center, California College of Arts and Crafts, Oakland, Part II at the San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art; Sophie Calle at Fraenkel Gallery, San Francisco; Cammie Toloui-Kotchekov at San Francisco Camerawork; Lise Swensen at Intersection for the Arts, San Francisco



used by several other artists in the show. Hilda Shum, Florence Flo Oy Wong and Rene Yung all used the altar as a central component in their works, examining the brutality and complexity of the now extinct practices of foot-and breast-binding.

The often isolating experience of gay identity was captured in a chilling installation by Chris Komater. The artist ran a personals ad in the paper advertising himself as “young, beefy and hairless.” The recorded voices of men who responded to the ad emanated from a series of small circular speakers mounted against the wall. One had to walk up close to the speakers to hear the individual voices as they communicated an underlying sense of desperation and pathos. Often the callers described their physical attributes — “I’m five-foot nine, 150 pounds,” “I have a great chest and hairy arms.” Here their bodies become commodities, disconnected articles for consumption. A sense of loneliness and longing for a relationship underscored the often painful search for a significant connection in a predominantly heterosexual world.

Rhoda London's installation, *Don't Call me a Goddess...The Continuing Education of the Eye*, attempted to rewrite and subvert the Eurocentric male canon of western art history. In mixed-media panels London used paint to obscure or obliterate art-historical images of woman as erotic object. An uninhabited chaise lounge in the center, like as the one used for Manet's *Olympia*, is effectively put to bed with bunches of cloth shrouding its original shape. By insisting on the complete exclusion of depictions of



women in visual art as a necessary way of avoiding objectification, London echoed elements of radical Feminist theory.

Using appropriated advertising images, Yolanda Lopez powerfully underscored the way that Latina women's identity is often not only objectified and stereotyped, but used to bolster and highlight white women's beauty and status. Shorter, darker Latina women, dressed and working in native clothing, are often cast in the role of subservient props for taller, whiter, more fashionable dressed women. As depicted by advertising, Lopez comments, "...working class women in upper class settings are probably the least beautiful and most invisible women in California."

A series of performances focusing on women's identity was held in conjunction with the "Mirror, Mirror" exhibition. For the most part, the pieces in the series were disappointing, lacking the depth and quality of most of the static works in the exhibition. The exception was a brazen performance by Nao Bustamante, an artist of great presence and power. In the course of her performance Bustamante tightly wrapped her naked body with packing tape, which functioned as a kind of brutal corset molding her breasts, waist and thighs into the ideal female form. As she moved around the stage throughout the performance she carried a large pair of scissors, which she periodically used to cut the packing tape as she applied it. The proximity of the scissors to Bustamante's vulnerable flesh heightened an ominous sense of woman's body as a potential site of violent manipulation; at best, her ritual suggested living mummification.

One way to challenge societal pressures for conformity is to fictionalize one's identity, as Sophie Calle does in her ongoing "Autobiographical Series." But, ironically, Calle often fabricates identities based on conventional expectations. For example, in *The Husband*, a series of photographs with accompanying text, she describes her longing to be "a wife" and decides to orchestrate a marriage to fulfill this desire. She persuades Greg Shephard, whom she hardly knows, to co-author a video about their relationship on a cross-country diving trip. The companion video, *Double Blind*, traces the anatomy of this depressing misadventure. Calle attempts to communicate in her own obtuse manner, while Shephard remains self-absorbed and aloof. In her narrative chronicle of her days with Shephard, Calle's frequent refrain "No sex last night," permeates the experience with a sense of her longing and despair. She may be orchestrating this relationship as an artist, but she is clearly vulnerable to Shephard's ability to withhold sex, which becomes his main source of power.

In spite of this "non-relationship," the couple is married at a 24-hour drive-up wedding window in Las Vegas, thus fulfilling Calle's fantasy of being a married woman. Of course, the marriage doesn't last beyond the road trip. In the end, Calle the artist retaliates with a humorous yet biting counterattack on Shephard. Through ingenious technical illusion, she virtually erases his genitals from memory in a large photography of his torso. Next to the

altered image she writes, "No matter how hard I try, I never remember the color of a man's eyes or the shape of his sex. But I decided a wife should know these things. So I made an effort to fight this amnesia. I now know he has green eyes."

Like Sophie Calle, Cammie Toloui-Kotchetkov uses the camera to tip the balance of sexual power. But unlike Calle's elaborately staged art/life projects, Kotchetkov's work does not blur fiction with reality. It's all real. She worked as a stripper in a peep show in San Francisco where customers watched her strip and masturbate through a glass wall. While watching, many customers would masturbate, some would tell their problem, while others had "detailed fantasies" she would act out for an extra charge. It was only after working there for a year and a half that she decided to bring her camera to photograph some of her customers. Surprisingly, over 100 customers agreed to be photographed by her while participating in the peep show, "because of trust and the offer of a free dildo show in exchange."

Kotchetkov inverts the "male gaze" by pointing her camera at her (mostly) male customers. Now she, and we viewers, see her customers in the role of sex object. But rather than exploring the irony of this unusual role reversal and using it for her own artistic purposes, Kotchetkov chronicles her customers soberly and directly and lets them set the tone. Many of the subjects seem to have passively agreed to have their picture taken. Some appear to revel and enjoy themselves while others seem ashamed and embarrassed. Many are partially clothed and masturbating. One stocky older man wears a bra, garter and stockings as he holds his erect penis and obscures his face with his arm in apparent shame. In most of these images, again, there is an extreme sense of loneliness, heightened by the foreboding darkness of the sex booth. A huge old clock at the top serves as a powerful metaphor for the grim, mechanistic nature of these sexual (un)encounters.

Comic relief was provided by Lise Swensen's video installation. Two talking pigs, with fully lipsticked female mouths, carry on a conversation, playing the roles of the artist's two selves. The stable, productive persona threatens to abandon the jealous, more carefree, irresponsible self. In the center, a pig with fluffy wings attempts to transcend the babble down below. By presenting the dialogue through the mouths of pigs, Swensen explodes our societal view of woman as properly attractive and polite. (The pigs also burp periodically, in a hearty fashion, as they speak.) Swensen also forces us to ask ourselves whether we are hearing the content of what the women are saying more fully because we aren't preoccupied with their physical appearances. ■

Beth Goldberg is a writer and independent curator in the Bay Area.

TOP LEFT: Stephanie Johnson, *Mirror, Mirror*, 1991, Mixed media installation