

Manipulated Desires

Mirror, mirror... at CCAC and San Jose ICA

BY MARY HULL WEBSTER

Mirror, mirror ...
*Gender Roles and
the Historical Significance of Beauty*

is one of the best group exhibitions of the year: while much of the work turns predictably on the victimization of women who carve themselves into a male image of an impersonally attractive woman, what's more significant is its illumination of the feelings of individuals of either gender whose sense of self worth and dignity is cruelly annihilated by our increasingly image-controlled society. Beauty, once Truth's companion, is now a handmaiden of Power's obsessive need for dominance. Journalistic truth, in its own power play, has transposed itself into the monstrous dictator of a manipulated "ideal reality" that is largely synthetic and coldly collective. Ann Carter's statement, that "continual expected physical perfection is a result of the gradual absorption of the private into the public," indicates just how far the idea of private selfhood has been eroded by public control and the equation, *beauty equals power*. By contrast, Naomi Wolf, quoted in Liz Maxwell's *Beauty Screening*, reminds us that "... most people are aware that a radiance can emerge from faces and bodies, making them truly beautiful," thus taking the redemptive position, exemplified by Caryl

Henry's *Into the Light*, of linking beauty with the radiance that comes with love of self and other: *beauty equals love* not in the sense of getting some for oneself, but of a self made beautiful by giving, radiating love.

The sense of desperation and falsity in the taped voices of some of the eighty-five men who answered a personal ad run by Chris Komater, who described herself as a "blond twinkie," witnesses the painful maneuvering of men and women alike to fit themselves into the collective vision of desirability. Referred to in works by Kerry Vander Meer and Orlan, cosmetic surgery suggests the woman who makes her subjective self into an object, both as a worthy attraction for the gaze of others and as a thing-self that she can find acceptable because its surfaces look more like the culture's ideal image of a powerful woman. Barbara DeGenevieve's *Untitled (Ask Me Anything I have Nothing to Hide)* presents a large photograph of a woman's head split all the way through. *The Changing Room*, an installation by Lorraine Weglarz, plays on women's discomfort at seeing themselves in fitting room mirrors, where the objectification that occurs in the mirror image confirms a feared deviance from the advertised world of manipulated desire.

A number of artists explore

the special circumstances of ethnicity and class. Florence Flo Oy Wong's and Hilda Shum's respective installations focus on the tradition among their Chinese foremothers of binding the feet, a practice associated with wealthy upper-class women and considered to be arousing to males, who felt more powerful in the presence of such helpless female dependence. It was, however, the mothers who had to break the feet of their own daughters and force the toes backward towards the heel in order to produce girls of high market value. Yolanda Lopez's installation also rests on social and racial determinants of beauty: "Since a woman's attractiveness in American culture determines her degree of visibility—working-class women in upper-class settings are probably the least beautiful and most invisible women in California." Lopez uses blown-up advertisements that depict pale women in the dress of privilege receiving goods and service from dark Latinas in subservient positions. Who's more beautiful—it's obvious that the advertiser has spotlighted the upper-class sister, leaving the other to play Cinderella. Again, I see an interesting complicity from the terrible mother behind the scenes; women as well as men are the perpetrators of these crimes against the female self.

In a dashing sprint for the limelight, Sasha YungJu Lee has made herself a cover girl on *Vanity Fair* and *Vogue* magazines. Although her statement alludes to gender, ethnicity and "the way minorities and women are depicted in the media," this politically correct babble is quite subverted by her technically invulnerable presentation and gorgeous pictures—one a very pregnant nude with a caption, "The New Sex Symbol; Nancy Collins talks to Expectant SuperMom YungJu." It must be the legendary fear of female

envy that keeps Lee from admitting that she's going for it. From the looks of these covers, she only wants to be a sexy, rich and stylish object that is not just an assimilated Korean/Canadian female, but at the top of the whole clawing heap of power-hungry women. A third equation, *power is not equal to victimization*, suggests the either/or predicament of contemporary individuals. While Louise Stanley's *The Toilet of Venus* sufficiently kills any notion of romance as the here-and-now Goddess of Love and her dressers perch amid cigarette butts, beer cans and a half-eaten sandwich, Mary Curtis Ratcliff's *Window Dressing*, a display of splendidly eccentric hats, reminds the viewer of the delight that can reside in the flickering romance of fashion.

Perhaps the strongest piece in both shows, *After Eden*, by Aziz & Cucher, is a computer-manipulated photograph of a virile, larger-than-life young man with clenched fists at his sides and the strong upward gaze of an Eagle Scout. Between his fists, however, is a curious V—no genitals. The implications of this astonishing photograph flip through the viewer's mind. Here is a perfect hero, devised by genetic breeding, who could be cloned indefinitely. He's utterly lacking any sort of individuality and seems to have been engineered, not born. Created to fit the ideal image of a culture that can no longer tolerate the inefficient personalizing of sexuality, he's a bullet-proof superman who undoubtedly is networked into the President of the World. Taking the implied fascistic cultivation of beauty further than any other piece in *Mirror, mirror ...*, the photograph captures with absolute symmetry the crushing of love, intelligence and spirit into a "desired" form. How one wishes for a fig leaf and the possibilities of mystery, and longs for the crazed, honest heat of desire that is so thoroughly annulled in this dutiful eunuch. One of Helms's soldiers, he is a perfectly uncensorable killer. ❧

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Mirror, mirror ... Gender Roles and the Historical Significance of Beauty through July 23 at Oliver Art Center, California College of Arts and Crafts, 5212 Broadway, Oakland, and through August 6 at San Jose Institute of Contemporary Art, 451 S. First St., San Jose.

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Readers' Forum

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Gender bender

Reports of my femininity have been greatly exaggerated.

In response to Mary Hull Webster's review of my work in *Mirror, Mirror...* ("Manipulated Desires," *AW*, 7/21/94), I ask that you clarify something for my viewers and your readers: *I am not a girl*. It's not out of fear of being labeled a girl that I make this request, for I've been called one on many occasions. It's the inaccurate contextualization of my work, and thus of Ms. Webster's interpretation, that troubles me.

The walls of my installation, *Personals*, are paneled with images of *male* bonding—*men* fishing and hunting together. The voices of *men* responding to my ad describe in intimate detail the *man* they are looking for. The voice in the center of the installation, the object of desire, belongs to a *man*. In my one-paragraph statement, from which Ms. Webster quotes, I refer to myself as a gay white *male*.

Did Ms. Webster look at or listen to my installation? My work is about male homosexual identity, objectification and desire. It is a mis-

representation to describe me as a woman, and an assumption based on heterosexual codes rather than on thoughtful critical analysis. Wake up and smell the testosterone, Ms. Webster.

Chris(topher John) Komater
San Francisco