

Interview with Terri Thomas

Joe Martin Hill

JMH: Your exhibition is conceived on multiple levels. The individual works stand alone, but there are permutations in series. And then there is an overall installation strategy of different positions relating to similar themes. In that sense, the exhibition itself might be viewed as an installation work. It's a lot to take in! What clues can you give for finding meaning in the whole? And is this important?

TT: I think of the exhibition space like a body with different, compartmentalized structures, each of which plays its role. During the open reception, the exhibit greets guests with a bit of spectacle: The performance works *The Red Carpet* and *Paris Sightings*, amidst champagne sipping and idealized oil paintings. Further into the exhibition, there are more authentic, private, quiet, perhaps even unbearable moments. So the structure is a metaphor for our bodily experience of the world. It's not until the viewer begins to work back up to the front facade, having experienced the interior, that the duality of the self becomes evident. Of course, the exhibition and the individual works reflect my experience, but this sense of public and private selves is something everyone can relate to.

JMH: Let's talk about the variety of stylistic tendencies and media in this metaphorical body. The *Barbie* images range from overtly grotesque, digitally manipulated photography to flat, Pop art images that seem indebted to Mel Ramos. What is the relationship between different media in your work?

TT: I'm attempting a panoptic view of an unarticulated, restrictive ideal. I'm looking at a set of related problems in our culture through different artistic styles. But in most cases, the medium or "style" is chosen to deepen the narrative – like the hacked, digital manipulations of Barbie faces – or to subvert a pre-existing image – as in my "indebted" Pop pin-ups. In other words, different ideas seem to want specific formal elaborations to reinforce the meaning of the image. In *The Others*, for example, the deteriorating, abstracted figures are about impermanence, decay, self-loathing and death of the physical body. The material I used, water-based absorbent ground medium laid on top of oil, can also signify this instability.

I don't want to limit myself stylistically. Plus, I'm interested in ambiguity, different entry points, *double entendre*... since I'm exploring notions of duality, I feel it makes sense to use abstraction and realism, surface and depth, still and moving images...

JMH: So it's definitely important to the meaning of the work whether it is photo-based or painting, abstract or realistic...

TT: Well, it may only become obvious how the stylistic differences and differences in media inform one another when they're installed together or depending on the progression of the installation space. I'd say it's something that's there if the viewer

wants to think about the body of work at that level, and I'd be gratified if this comes across.

JMH: Speaking of the Barbie faces, there's a double self-portrait by Douglas Gordon called *Monster* that might provide a useful foil in defining your thematic intentions. It's a sort of 'before and after,' with a straightforward self-portrait on the left, another distorted with Scotch tape on the right.

TT: Yes, I know that work and I really love Douglas Gordon. I can really relate to some of the similar, dichotomous aspects of his work – good and evil, black and white, interior and exterior. But when I see *Monster*, I want to flip the portraits around in my head. One of my recent paintings, *The State Of Becoming* is sort of like *Monster* in reverse. I think many women, bombarded daily with images of idealized beauty, are conditioned to feel like they start off as the *monster*. Advertising suggests that women are already a Mrs. Jekyll, and we're encouraged to transform ourselves into the beautiful and in-control Dr. Hyde. So if Gordon's *Monster* is more about Good and Evil, *The State of Becoming* is about societal pressures that have men and women wanting to turn their so-called evils into good. And of course this is an endless process... how the media, focused on images of future happiness, persuades our 'before and after' transformations.

JMH: For those who aren't familiar with the often-overlooked figure of Mel Ramos, what seems most different about your deployment of Pop is the current context in which it's used. That is, when Ramos started working with his pin-ups in the early 60s, the media infiltration of our everyday lives had only just begun, the feminist critique of the dominant culture had yet to begin... Ironic though Ramos' own images might be, one could say it was still an age of innocence in American society, for better or worse. How do you see the difference in your use of this readymade aesthetic?

TT: My reading of Ramos is less charitable: his use of the pin-up is *supposedly* satirical... maybe... but a man who paints women objects depicted as male-consumables just seems sexist to me. As a women artist, I objectify my own body with the intention of revealing a subjective narrative, the experience of a mind/body, subject/object duality. In other words, by objectifying myself or perceiving myself as an artist looking at a still life, I'm attempting to mimic how women observe themselves and detach mentally (if not emotionally) from their own forms....

I wonder if women have been so inundated by the idea of the pin-up or other fabricated ideals and clichés of desire that we have begun to appropriate a masculine aesthetic toward ourselves.

JMH: That's certainly what Laura Mulvey argued in her classic text "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" from the mid-70s... her basic idea is that the dominant "gaze", as she calls it, is the "male gaze" and that this male point of view is so deeply inscribed within cinema and other visual forms that it's hard to get beyond it or find an alternative.

TT: Exactly, and things have probably only gotten worse since then, at least so far as the visual world goes. We have begun to treat *ourselves* as objects, now with replaceable parts, to be viewed, manipulated and “perfected” for the sake of desire. The deployment of Pop, as you called it, or my use of heavy, saturated and inverted colors is a way to highlight this dehumanizing factor and, hopefully, to de-sex the nude. The slick unattainability, the seduction and spectacle, is all part of the packaging of the media today. Pushing it towards the flat and cartoonish – or using doubled imagery derived from photographic positive/negative processes – it’s a self-conscious attempt to foreground the processes of mass media while remaining inside the vocabularies of contemporary art.

JMH: The video “Wolftrap Motel” reminds me of a couple of other works from the vaults of mid-70s performance art: Gina Pane’s *Self-portraits* and Valie Export’s ... *remote... remote...* These works date to 1973 and both are excruciating videos involving fingernails, blood and self-mutilation. I think what you said implies as much, but would it be fair to gauge the intention of your work by the changes that have taken place in society, and specifically in the role of women, in the intervening years?

TT: Yes. I have done a lot of reading in feminist literature, and at first it sounded like conspiracy theories, which I resisted. But over time, it’s become much more convincing and evident. Naomi Wolf, for example, in *The Beauty Myth* makes a distinction between women that were once imprisoned by their homes – falling into traditional gender roles, for example – are now imprisoned by their bodies. I think this is exactly right. I’ve experienced the pressure of being expected to *act like a man* and, at the same time, to *look like a real woman*. Even the Guerilla Girls think a woman should try to look her best.

But define “Best” when technologically, so much is now medically and genetically possible. The ‘ideals’ we compare ourselves with are increasingly extravagant and no longer human. As a culture, I’m sure we’re experiencing more societal pressures, self-loathing, fat-obsessing, fear of aging and all sorts of related psychoses than we did thirty years ago. Women are inflicting tremendous amounts of pain and hunger on themselves – sometimes even dying as a result. All in order to experience some type of psychological relief from a perceived failure to live up to these perverse ideals.

Our societal behavior today is the perfect foundation for a second wave of eugenics. We are literally buying into a utopian promise, and I don’t think it’s too much to say the mass media supports the re-building of a new eugenic consciousness. We are becoming both perfect products and perfect consumers. People spend loads of money to cut up the healthy, God-given parts of their bodies to achieve some ideal of beauty and perfection. We are taught this will improve our lives, bringing us happiness, status and success. And if we so readily choose this for ourselves, I don’t think we’re far off from also making these similar decisions for our offspring.

JMH: So even if we've made some advances – socially, and certainly technologically – since the 70s, it sounds like you think we have as much or more to fear from ourselves and from our culture than we did then!

TT: Yes, absolutely.

JMH: A lot of contemporary painters have recently been mining a particular vein derived from realism but that pushes the representational image towards caricature or to grotesque representations, particularly of female gender. I'm thinking of Lisa Yuskavage and John Currin, whose buxom bombshells would seem equally at home in some sort of *Playboy* cartoon. It seems counterintuitive that artists should be using paint to make such images. Why do you think this is happening? Actually, that may be asking for your philosophy of painting and its meaning in the world today!

TT: I think that the rules of painting are changing. Marilyn Minter, whose work is on the cover of the most recent Whitney Biennial, Jeff Koons, Damien Hirst, Chuck Close, Gerhard Richter – they are all either heavily referencing photographs or are using a type of photo-realism in a conceptual way. The point seems to be to have the viewer re-investigate similar images proliferating our lives through mass media. Likewise, images themselves become a big part of the subject for me.

But John Currin also references photos, and perhaps Yuskavage uses them, too. Their artistic departure from the photographic seems to be an attempt to escape the clutches of the media. I read somewhere that Currin tried Photoshop but determined that it made him feel removed from the physical aspects of painting, which is the point for him. I honestly don't know how one can use paint as a medium and not feel its physical aspects, regardless the process one uses to arrive at the final work. But the physicality or materiality of the paint is not my sole purpose for using it, as it is for Jenny Saville, for example.

JMH: I'm sure you know almost all of her work is based upon photographs...

TT: Yes, the language of the medium and the technique is important to me too, but sometimes the language might then become a metaphor for something else. For instance, if I paint the female nude with oil on a canvas, the obvious thing is that I'm deliberately entering a very patriarchal tradition – particularly as my paintings are life-sized and based on realism, because I want the viewer to physically relate to the figures as a 'realistic' object or image addressing real societal issues. I think Currin and Yuskavage may also want their images to be recognized as mirrors of the world, so to speak, but their chosen styles – more towards animation or caricature than real characters – seems to put the emphasis on the distortion itself, rather than verisimilitude. Part of my strategy is to lure people in with illusion. I want people to investigate whether the painting is a photograph, digital print, painting or a reproduction, and that investigative process becomes a metaphor for how I hope one might investigate, even scrutinize any image, impulse or desire.

JMH: Are your paintings generally derived from photographs?

TT: Yes, mostly. A few are from memory: the memory of a photograph or reflection in a mirror, which are the only ways one can view the physicality of one's self.

JMH: A lot of what we've been talking about seems to apply primarily to the slick, hot, and sugary in your work – the surface appearance in your body metaphor, I guess. And these surfaces now seem a lot more acidic – even caustic – than one might have initially thought. Let's talk about the more introspective works like the Polaroids of empty chairs and their relationship to the expressionist series of paintings entitled *The Others*. As works of art, they're quite different, but they share motifs and a melancholic, almost memorial tone.

TT: Yeah, I see what you mean. A lot of my doubles share a somber, stoic, memorial tone. Since I bought these chairs in pairs, sanded, stained, painted and upholstered them, I do think of these as double self-portraiture, or as objects with an erased history. So, I agree that these portraits read a little melancholy and quiet, seemingly in opposition to the louder, heavily saturated, least-to-be-trusted images. However, the style and material of the chairs suggest the upper-middle class, much like the Victorian dresses in *Eugenics-Survival of the Prettiest*. And in one of the Polaroid's, one of the chairs has begun to vanish, as if to say that even the immediacy of an instamatic cannot be trusted. I guess I think of all my work more as a continuum, and perhaps I see or feel relationships between different works that differ from what others will perceive.

JMH: Doubling plays a huge role in your work, which must derive in large part from having lived your life as a twin. This is an experience – an ontological condition! –most of us can't even fathom. How does this play out in your work and do you think self-consciously about your individuality and its expression?

TT: Yes, as a kid, I never understood what the big deal was having a twin sister, but for as long as I can remember, and still today, strangers come up to us when we're together and ask us questions about our being twins. One of the frustrations growing up was that we always received the exact same gifts, but in different colors, so we had to open our gifts back to back so that the other wouldn't ruin the surprise. Later, it started to dawn on me how the media has generated the notion that twins are duplicates of the same person, and many twins, of course, live out this experience. So struggling for personal identity was very important to me growing up.

In my *Indivi/duality* series, I try to flip this idea by exploring the duality within each individual... and I do feel like there are some very honest and revealing narratives in this body of work. But for me the importance of this series was in addressing media stereotyping of female twins. Advertising has used twins as a template for the double, which became a metaphor for 'two for the price of one' or 'before and after,' etc. Today, partially naked twins sexualize the products they try to sell, so catch phrases like 'double trouble,' 'double your pleasure, double your fun,' and 'twin packs,' are quite familiar and

have created an over-sexualized twin stereotype in the common culture. I'm obviously playing on this in the *Perfect World* paintings and with the *Two on Red Satin*.

But also my work intends to subvert these tactics by both criticizing and reinforcing the idea that One is a just a replica of the Other. They are meant to be visually ambiguous. When fueling the idea that one is a replica of the other, my thinking moved from using double self-portraiture, to ideas of artificial twinning or cloning. Paintings like *Monozygotic* or *Copy* started to give a general, more technological meaning to notions of biological 'nature' versus genetically 'nurtured' and the 'individual' versus the 'multiple.' And it's here that the positive/negative processes of photography play a key role, as in *Perfect World*, too. But my use of doubles is mainly to address the dualities we all have as individuals – or at least I hope it might resonate that way on a personal level....

JMH: You put a lot of thought into the title of this exhibition and the character and quality of the catchy logo, its trademark, so to speak. There's definitely a scientific, clinical quality to this graphic, although one might also imagine modifying it for a high-tech bubblegum. It seems to capture the double-edged quality of your work quite well. But in the mix of 'genes,' 'eugenics,' 'you,' and candy-colored corporate logos, I wonder if there is an explicit message you hope your viewers will take away – or use as a lens through which to view the exhibition as a whole.

TT: I wanted the pink shape to look like both a flower and an atom. The flower represents ideals of beauty and perfection. And the atom represents science and technology. Given our discussion, it's probably pretty clear how I think these relate to each other! And, yes, "U" within this corporate logo can be read as a direct address to the viewer...

Joe Martin Hill is the founder of Vision-Connect, a management and curatorial consultancy based in New York. An active writer and reviewer of contemporary art, Joe is also on the curatorial team assisting Robert Storr in the preparation of the Venice Biennale for 2007.