

Cantanker Interview with Debra Broz

FETE BUCOLIQUE

Terri Thomas' work is certainly eye-catching – color-saturated, precisely rendered and often shocking. All these elements make for good work, but there is something else – something more – that makes Thomas' work so fascinating. In paintings and photographs the same face appears again and again. Eventually, the realization comes – the woman portrayed is not a mere artist's muse, it is the artist herself. It is *her* body in the positions of porn, painted in a contortion of glowing candy colors, *her* face that has been manipulated into resemblances of Barbie, celebrities such as Angelina Jolie, or, in her latest work, Cicciolina (the porn star ex-wife of artist Jeff Koons). It is Thomas, costumed and staged, revealed, concealed, exposed, and juxtaposed. She is at once the muse and the voyeur, subject and object.

While on one level her work is an exploration of herself (Thomas is an identical twin whose previous career was in the beauty industry), it is also an examination of society at large. Her work comments on the media's portrayal of beauty, sexuality, individuality and femininity and how this representation creates and feeds societal expectations.

A master of self-analysis, Thomas' work makes the viewer hyper-aware of the ridiculousness of, repulsion from and attraction to social taboos. Her newest work is fraught with artifice and symbolism – and often her form is still at center stage, altered and rendered, beautiful and grotesque, simultaneously revealed and masked by the filters of social norms and deviance.

What is the role of self-portraiture in your work? Why do you use yourself as a subject and not a model (besides the fact, for example, that you don't have to convince another person to dress up in floral pasties and sit on a pig?)

I started off in school photographing and painting my friends and appropriating porn. But something was missing – I felt removed from my work. There were more risks I could take, more vulnerability to reveal, and deeper, more personal issues to uncover that could only happen through sharing private experiences, staging and exposing my own body. And given concerns about the growing “raunch culture” and notions of “false consciousness” I think it's important to explore the issues pertaining to identity and sexuality by putting myself at stake... it's really easy to criticize from the periphery or a place of safety. Of course it has also made sense for me as an identical twin myself to address the “commoditization of multiples” and idea of identity itself.

I don't know that I'll always use my own body in my work, but I felt I had to at least start there. I knew I did not want to do what, say, Mel Ramos or John Currin have done, which feels like the same ole thing: traditional, patriarchal... men re-interpreting more depictions of women. Early on, I looked to artists like Sherman, Orlan, Schneeman, Wilke and Saville, who felt strongly about playing the role of both artist and muse and made this manifest in their work. Of course, there are great male artists that do this, too... Vito Acconci, Douglas Gordon, Mathew Barney and Chris Burden, among others.

I feel like the sexual themes in your work are really a symbol for the larger idea of self-pleasure, not just through sex, but through all aspects of life. Self-pleasure is both glorifying and disgraceful – in the way that the characters are often dressed in gaudy costumes or juxtaposed with farm animals, yet their expressions seem very self-satisfied...your comments?

Yes, I agree with your idea that self-pleasure can be both glorifying and disgraceful. Ha! I've heard that women in porn, who actually orgasm during the scene are cut from the film because it isn't considered "pretty." Pleasure and play are subjective: what is playful and pleasurable to some may be shocking, grotesque, painful or terrifying to others.

I deliberately set out for this work to be very much about pleasure but it's also about performance and play. The costumes were intended to convey more child-like sexual codes. Like a young, innocent, regurgitating adolescent, who found her mother's chest of naughty panties and fishnets and wanted to play dress up, naively combining fuchsia thigh highs with turquoise green pumps and pink daisy pasties.

So, on one hand, I'm performing gender. I'm "playing" that "girl" ...the girl who pleasures in dressing up, wearing heels, escaping to some wild, ephemeral place, like a pastoral scene, where one goes to be in a 'state of leisure', to contemplate one's own sexual desires. ...A blithe place unconcerned with what is considered socially appropriate or inappropriate. And so the animals add another layer with their narratives and symbolic meanings. The "girl," the "nymphs," the "shepherdess" are definitely interested in their own pleasure, but I'm not sure that they are intended to be entirely "self-satisfied."

Some may call your work feminist. What is your response to that?

Some may call it anti-feminist.

When I took my first "Art & Feminism" class in school, there were about thirty women and one man. I was the only woman who rejected the title "feminist" and the guy in the class (who is a good friend today) proudly owned the title. At the time, I just couldn't completely align with the idea that while all these so-called angry women in the 70s were respectably *fighting* for equality, they were seemingly doing it in such a segregating way... this being my initial response to events that transpired in an era before my time.

Today, I feel that my reaction may have been too limited for the diversity of feminist ideas. That said, I continue to be challenged by answering questions like "Am I a Feminist?" "Is my work Feminist?" which begs a binary yes or no response. There are beliefs around what feminism is that I would claim as my own, some I would reject.

How absurd today, to think that women would have to definitively choose to want cock or no cock, penetration or no penetration, to be a good girl or bad, dominant or passive, empowered or a victim. And surprisingly, there are "Feminists" out there who adhere to the idea that some of these scenarios are an "either/or" situation. I think women today, should have the freedom, inventiveness and sense of play to momentarily move in and out of these, or any desires. And fortunately, we today live in a culture where that is more possible. There is no denying the strength, power and effectiveness that the Feminists of the 70s demonstrated as they forged the way for future generations. Their poignant (if not always great) art, have brought us one step closer to understanding classlessness, unprejudiced, open-mindedness and social equality. If those are the goals of an evolved contemporary Feminism, it is politics I share and claim as my own.

Some of your most recent work depicts sexual torture devices. What do you think objects say about the collective identity of a culture?

I think my jeweled medieval torture devices could be read many different ways. Originally, I was really fascinated by how these ornate implements were so beautifully crafted for such punishing, horrid uses ...especially when the craftsmen who labored over the creation became the object's first victim, as was

the case for Perillos of Athens, who invented and sculpted for king Phalaris an exquisite metal “Brazen Bull” used to burn people alive in its belly. To Perillos’ surprise, he was the Bull’s first victim.

Perhaps this story is a good allegory of how we as a society create objects that then in turn create or inform our own identities and destinies.

How do you think these objects relate to contemporary views of sexuality?

On one level, my beaded “Devices” are a comment on the paradoxical and punishing aspects of beauty, attraction and repulsion. But showing them in different, more sexualized contexts, I found that the work has more to do with desire ...or rather, the contradictions of desire:

How we are strongly attracted to things that we know could manifest in some type of pain;
How we desire to be safe, but also want to be reckless and dangerous;
How we want both stability and total freedom;
How we want tenderness and romance, but also want our hair pulled, and to be fucked.

The challenge is to create objects that convey this ambivalence, this friction.

Alongside my newer paintings, I intended these ornamental objects (both my “Devices” and “Exotics”) to be a sort of extension of the “Porno Pills” body of work from my “U-Genics” show. I had been interested in how the media has done such a good job linking all sorts of identity concepts (class, beauty, fitness, etc) to sexuality, so that our initial responses to these signifiers stimulate seduction, allure and desire. But in the reality of our minds and bedrooms, this falsity can create guilt, shame and repulsion, as these artificial links blur the boundaries between the pornography industry and a more sincere sensuality and eroticism. At times of my own arousal, my mind deviates, and a wave of humor, sometimes horror, passes over me in the realization that I’m acting out some sexualized, pornographic cliché, or worse, getting off on it. So within the work I’m trying to create that tension - trying to keep the viewer suspended in the ambiguity of whether I’m exacerbating or ridiculing our desires and curious tendencies.

There is definitely an element of black humor in your work, a comical twisting of title, theme and execution – I’m thinking, most recently, of your trophies. What role does this sort of ironic humor have in your work –how does it develop?

I’d say, there is definitely an element of self-satire. I’m just mocking my own aspirations to impress others, be loved, accepted, or desired. I think our networked culture has reached a fever pitch of obsession with self-presentation and identity production... Facebook, MySpace, Flickr, U-Tube, etc. these are a craze (often times exhibiting some of the most mind-boggling, obnoxious antics) because underneath it all, most of us want to be liked and desire approval. Or perhaps, a darker interpretation is that many are seeking attention (whether it’s positive or negative) in order to basically feel alive, connected or self-important.

Awarding myself the “Best Pig” trophy (for example) feels pretty accurate, and somehow frees me to create more unapologetic images.

Your last big exhibition was themed “U-Genics.” What is the concept of your upcoming Houston show? And how did you go from one to the other?

My upcoming show, *Fete Bucolique*, is a progression from my last solo show, U-Genics. For U-Genics, I attempted to create a Utopian Spectacle that revealed a deeper Spectacle of Anxiety that lay inherently within. I wanted to expand upon some of the ideas from the last series of works I did from this show, *Porno Pills*. While I continue to work with the idea of how we are conditioned to desire, identify with and be informed by the media, in my new work some of the focus has shifted onto themes such as self-reinvention, fantasy, escapism and freedom. *Fete bucolique* is a French term that refers to a festival of the pastoral, rustic life and is associated with emotional, decorative Baroque Art and early Renaissance pastoral paintings created by artists such as Giorgione, Titian, Poussin and Fragonard. Also, it is a term laden with sexual implications, suggesting an adventurous, romantic, flirtatious, passionate, fantasy of a naïve and tender love passage that leads to nowhere. Although social commentary, personal narratives and contradictions are embedded within the works, overall they are a return to play.

Is all art essentially an exploration of identity?

Yes. I've come to believe that all art is self-portraiture, cathartic, and narcissistic. Louise Bourgeois said it best, "Art is a guarantee of sanity."

Fete Bucolique opens at the New Gallery in Houston, Texas on May 2, 2009. www.terriThomasart.com