

New Moves in an Old Game

by James M. Saslow

Don't talk to *me* about *gender*, honey. I may be a tweedy bearded art professor, but once a year I ride on a Gay Pride parade float wearing my signature white Empire gown and lace-fringed Russian tiara. And let me tell *you*, those counter-demonstrators outside St. Patrick's have plenty to say about my gender identity — not to mention my moral right to exist on this planet. So I look at this exhibition, and it's *fabulous* to see how many artists have woken up to gender as an aesthetic and political issue. But I also ask, When is the rest of the world going to smell the coffee? Since "Adam delved and Eve span," the West has propounded a mythic history with profound implications for conventions of masculine and feminine roles and emotions. These pervasive rules of decorum are now as archaic as the King James language in which we learned them; but until the Renaissance, the visual arts did not much question them. Unsurprisingly, most artists reproduced prevailing norms: Madonnas were motherly or queenly, Jupiter suitably butch. And art critics were concerned with policing, not problematizing: In his 16th-century treatise *L'Aretino*, Ludovico Dolce praised Raphael for painting the proper physical distinctions between boys and girls and slapped Michelangelo, who "does not know or will not observe those differences."

At about the same time, however, artists began carving out some small conceptual space for alternative consciousness. One tool, still evident in the present exhibit, was humor. Giorgio Vasari tells us in his *Lives* about an irreverent artist named Nunziato who, when asked for a Madonna that would not incite lust in parishioners, painted her with a mustache—a prank repeated centuries later by Marcel Duchamp on the Mona Lisa. A

more subversive method was to sneak some personal element into the interstices of official iconography. The androgynous grace of Botticelli's and Leonardo's adolescent angels takes on new meaning in light of their arrests for committing sodomy with boy apprentices. In the Baroque era, Artemisia Gentileschi's empathetic portrayals of the biblical murderess Judith served as a private revenge fantasy for her own experience of rape.

However gleefully (and productively) modern historians are rediscovering such embryonic gender-variant artists, we should not expect to find in them the full-blown self-consciousness of a later time. Walter Pater, the 19th century English critic who first alerted us to the wistful androgyny of Botticelli and Leonardo, was himself a closeted homosexual; his reading of the past, however sensitive, tells as much about his own search for coded alternatives to Victorianism as about the Renaissance. Not until Pater's own day could the realist Rosa Bonheur, who painted disguised self-portraits in drag, begin to imagine — and live — an alternative gender identity as a woman trying to move in the male sphere. Yet even she, ever ambivalent about the cost of nonconformity, preserved her lucrative ties with officialdom.

Only in the modern era has the artist shifted definitively from being an agent of society to being its adversary. And postmodernist culture, as Lyotard and his fellow post-structuralists have defined it, is characterized by a profound distrust toward our own sacred historical narratives, whether Adam-and-Eve or the progress of reason. Whereas earlier artists played by the rules of the dominant social-aesthetic discourse, artists like those in this exhibit aim not simply to make new moves within the old rules, but to question, even to change the rules of that game. They deconstruct those aptly named "master narratives" with humor, and lan-

guage, and unlikely juxtapositions; and Duchamp's nose-thumbing alter ego, Rose Sélavy, is the grandmother of us all.

As an index of this change, compare Jean-Baptiste Greuze's famous Metropolitan Museum picture *Broken Eggs* to Holly Morse's *Dirty*. Both are about "deflowering," but the 18th-century man assumes our complicity in his allegorized melodrama of lost virginity, while the 20th-century woman spells out the allegory, opening it for discussion. The etched pane over Ken Aptekar's painted "pansy" makes even more explicit how we "see" reality through a glass darkly — a glass of learned verbal narratives. Both artists seek to unravel the nexus of negative, even hostile associations between flowers, sex, femininity, and homosexuality.

Some of these artists seek substitute archetypes for the ancient gods and heroes; others question the very notion of historical precedent. Greg Davidek's "King" and "Centaur" dismember these antique symbols of male power and sexuality; in contrast, Margo Machida, like Bonheur, has been fascinated with the male image, in pictures (not shown here) of the sexually ambiguous author Yukio Mishima. Millie Wilson's mock-heroic academes about Romaine Brooks and friends simultaneously honors a lesbian artistic forerunner and lampoons the formulaic arthistorical pedigree.

An inevitable question: are there any differences between the male and female agendas? Nancy Davidson's medium of oilstick rubbing explores the current question whether women have a distinctively tactile sensibility; her process is as much about gender as are the domestic objects she depicts. Lillian Mulero also deals in traditionally feminine "decorative" pattern and fabric, subverting this cliché by treating a man as a pattern (and a flowered one, at that). The macho stance of her urinating woman, on the other hand, appropriates "Folk Art" to

claim male prerogatives. By contrast, the men seem more concerned with the burden of maintaining that aggressive male mystique. Aptekar's knights are far too armored to make good on their verbal challenge of penetration; Greg Drasler's *métier* figures are entrapped in the symbols of their work; Lee Gordon's masks render the homiest activity remote and ominous. As one transvestite put it in Mariette Allen's recent book, *Transformations*, "Women have needed liberation to; men need liberation from."

One further complication: art and gender are not independent of ethnicity, class, and sexual orientation. Bonheur and Brooks were able to actualize their deviant fantasies largely because both were independently wealthy. Not that the connections are always so clear or simple. Mishima's homosexuality was integral to his hypermasculine conception of samurai-style male love, which I'd like to think is relevant to Machida's appropriations. But does she identify with him because he's a man, or a homosexual, or an icon of her Japanese heritage?

Perhaps a little of each: her "*Noli me tangere*" asks about the Eastern body no less than the Western myth of Mary Magdalene. Come to think of it, my own imagery draws on both gender and ethnicity, too; and sometimes gender may not be uppermost in my mind — or in my viewers'. My drag persona, the Grand Duchess Anastasia Sazlova, was born as much from nostalgia for the land of my own forebears as from the Duchampian impulse toward genderfuck. Her picture once made the morning papers on the very day I was to start a new teaching job. I needn't have worried: The dean turned out to teach Slavic languages, and — our contrasting notions of couture counting less to him than our shared love of things Russian — he cheerily greeted me as, "Ah, the Czarina!"

That's as it should be — but all too seldom is. As the gender wars drag on and the

discourse battles proliferate, this participant-observer is moved both to exult in the critical acumen and wit of the works here, *and* to lament how little territory such offensives have captured. Frankly, I'm tired of "problematizing" gender, of analyzing oppression, of preaching the crusade of diversity. Why is the process of deconstruction and transformation taking so long? Why hasn't every type-A corporate CEO long since felt

H.I.H.
The Grand Duchess
Anastasia Sazlova



the danger of heart attack in Drasler's images of men literally imprisoned in their jobs? To borrow an exasperated phrase from the Vietnam era, Why can't we just declare victory and go home?

Well, in part because there's a lot of cultural inertia to be overcome, dating back to when the Roman architect Vitruvius assigned male and female personas to the orders of classical architecture. And also because most people aren't paying much attention, or at least not productive attention.

It is impossible to discuss the images in this show without acknowledging that the aesthetic and social space in which they circulate is painfully circumscribed. The avant-garde art world is only a thin layer of meat sandwiched between two heavier slabs of very white bread. Pressing down from the top is the officially sanctioned high culture of uptown museums and galleries; underneath is the thicker layer of popular culture — which, at least in the U.S., has historically lacked radical consciousness.

This mainstream culture has always sought to rope off the space in which poten-

tially destabilizing alternative visions can circulate, and to draw the noose ever tighter. It maintains its hegemony by various means: censorship, prosecution, and not-so benign neglect. And artists have long had to run the gauntlet of public tolerance. When Benvenuto Cellini proposed a statue of Jupiter wooing Ganymede, his archrival Bandinelli denounced him as a "dirty sodomite." Cellini consoled himself by carving a touchingly erotic sculpture of Apollo with the young boy Hyacinthus; but the swashbuckling artist, later sentenced to house arrest for sodomy, had learned enough to keep it in his own studio until his death.

And let's not even *talk* about Jesse Helms; or the Art Institute student who painted Chicago's mayor in a dress, bringing down a City Council order to lock up the picture; or Madame Mishima, who wouldn't let Paul Schrader make a film about her late husband without narrowing the gay angle to the point of invisibility; or Robert Mapplethorpe, whose visual statement that the male body could be as beautiful as a calla lily was so threatening to Western Civilization that the Cincinnati police had to videotape it for court evidence.

You think *that's* bad.... just imagine if Her Imperial Highness Sazlova wanted to stage a performance art piece in conjunction with the current exhibition. Would "she" get an NEA grant? Or a measly review in the dailies, to say nothing of a profile in the *Sunday Times*?

Don't hold your breath. If she were lucky, she'd be ignored; if not, she'd be videotaped for an obscenity trial. And beard or no beard, when the revolution comes from the right, this is one princess who doesn't expect to be saved by male privilege.

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