

# ***Post-Boys&Girls: The Return of the Suppressed***

by Carol Zemel

A decade after progressive critics proclaimed the "end of painting" and denounced the conservatism of neo-expressionist styles,<sup>1</sup> painting-with-a-politics has reemerged with a complex and challenging agenda. In some respects *Post-Boys&Girls* suggests a modish impudence towards serious categories of oppression and constraint. But within this playful posture, the exhibition sets the issues squarely before us. A lively range of pictorial strategies refutes the so-called bankruptcy of painting and offers a stirring cultural politics of gender, race, and ethnicity.

Because they are insistently political, the arguments against painting are worth reviewing. Briefly, painting as a practice was construed in class terms as a parade of styles produced by bourgeois artists for a capitalist market. Thus, painting, and specifically the return to figuration in the late '70s and '80s, was deemed a conservative impulse designed to perpetuate oppressive cultural hierarchies and forms. Neo-expressionist painting in particular,<sup>2</sup> with its display of angst-filled, heroic subjects and its veneration of the master's "hand" seemed, like European figurative art after WW1, to repeat a reactionary flight from the problems of the present and to substitute a Reagan-esque nostalgia for traditional values, myths and hierarchies. For many artists, the way beyond the impasse of painting's recapture by bourgeois culture was through deconstructive textual strategies, site-specific installations and mass cultural, photo-based techniques.

At the heart of these warnings is an idealist belief in the fixed or essential meaning of styles. Seen in these terms, a style is so laden with historical associations that it is

immutably bound to its period of origin, with every later incarnation signifying nostalgia or decadence. If post-modernism has shown us anything, however, it is that style can be deployed as a fluid, critical language with new meaning in its present usages, and as such, it can decode and disrupt those older values and mythologies. To be sure, critics acknowledge that time and circumstance shape the significance of these methods.<sup>3</sup> But can we effectively decode these painterly revisions through the usual formal analyses and assessments of style? From what "official" perspective is the neo-Cubism produced in Moscow in 1985 deemed stylistically naive, retrograde, or derivative? Does a vehement, gestural style produced by an Asian-American woman in this exhibition signify the same narcissistic withdrawal that it did in the hands of German men?

The sites of conflict in contemporary culture have also shifted drastically in recent years. The Euro-centric polarities—West-East, bourgeois-socialist, realism-abstraction—that structured the battles and victories of modernism have been supplanted by a political and cultural mapping of First, Second and Third World zones. In exhibitions as far-flung as the recent Soho/Harlem-sited *Decade Show* and the *Havana Biennale*, the issue is not the "end of painting," but rather how various de-constructions and reconstructions of familiar media enable and voice a variety of gendered and multi-cultural points of view.

The painter who invokes a past style does not simply yearn for past traditions and histories. An elegant Deco-Surrealism, as Greg Drasler uses it for pictures of mannered bedroom interiors, produces uneasy attention to the "safeties" of the boudoir, the dreams of the bourgeoisie, and the private sanctuaries of class. The intricately patterned medievalism that surrounds Aptekar's armored knights renders ironic the splendor of

that chivalric masculinity. Seen this way, what might appear as gadfly eclecticism—"eclectico" is Hal Foster's term,<sup>4</sup> or "re-inventing the Beaux-Arts" as New Museum curators Laura Trippi and Gary Sangster put it<sup>5</sup>—is evidence instead of an elaborate conceptual repertoire that allows emblematic designs (Davidson, Davidek, Machida) and image-text combinations (Morse, Aptekar) to appear comfortably in company with pictorial fragments adopted from photographic and mass media practices (Davidek, Wilson) and allegorical reprises of historical styles (Drasler, Mulero). In each case, stylistic manipulations have a critical dimension, emphatically linking the personal and private to cultural and social forms.

No less crucial in this exhibition are the pleasures in the medium the pictures allow. For those critical of painting, old master methods meant old master pleasures, and expert play of materials constituted seductive dominion over what was shown. Some artists banished such pleasure to escape this power play. The pleasures of paint return here—albeit with a purpose. Neither titillating nor narrowly "aesthetic", these visceral and immediate sensations direct the pictures' impact and social meanings. Nancy Davidson's oilstick rubbings of quotidian objects like ironing boards and rugs, for example, monumentalize the fragile intimacies of a sensuously rubbed and caressed surface. Holly Morse's pictures combine sinuously curled texts with juicy fruit-laden hats. But pleasure at this level is also, in a sense, polymorphous perverse. It can attract and engulf in order to revulse; the pleasures of pigment can coax us close to more repellent imagery. For example, delicate shadows and highlights in oil and watercolor stage the grotesque dimensions of Lee Gordon's pictured masculinities, attracting us to the hooded costume's sensual folds. Margo Machida's thick facture invests her stark black, white

and red figures with ominous fury. And bright patterns bring both a festive air and edgy tension to Lillian Mulero's primitivist icons.

But what adds special meaning to these pictures is the gendered position of the maker and the way viewers are challenged to engage the work in these terms. Indeed, the critique of painting has been lodged largely by white male critics, speaking from and about a masculine "mainstream." Acknowledging the need to end the universalizing myth of the artist-creator, critics proposed a "death of the author" position adopted from literary criticism, rather than a multiplicity of artist-subject positions. The argument assumes a simplified wholeness for "painting" as a category, and slams the door on a more inclusive painting practice.<sup>6</sup> But gender, race and ethnic issues introduced and made central by feminism have significantly revitalized picture-making, despite some critical anxiety that pluralism risks the loss of a cutting edge,<sup>7</sup> or that the "new tribalism," as the *New York Times* calls it, will produce art "suffocated by the requirement that nobody be either offended or excluded."<sup>8</sup> One wonders, given this logic, just who it is that now feels lost in the crowd. In the face of such resistance, there is all the more reason to recognize the growing multi-cultural presence and success.

The fiction of a unitary subject is addressed in Millie Wilson's installation about lesbian painter Romaine Brooks, *The Artist that is Not One*. The title derives from French feminist Luce Irigaray's characterization of women as *This Sex which is not one*, and alludes to Natalie Barney's lesbian novel *The One Who is Legion*, which Brooks illustrated. Wilson's design splits portrait images and arranges blocks of paint and text in an asymmetric sequence that precludes any visual center or "core." As elements of Brook's ex-patriate, androgynous, artistic, and lesbian "identity," these parts display the facets

of a utopian lesbian milieu, while insisting that viewers not force the subject—or ourselves—into any simple, single category.

The Asian faces and figures in Margo Machida's paintings hurtle towards the viewer with disquieting configurations of an ethnic femininity. These glaring matrons, grimacing men, demure daughters and anguished nudes seem caught in some unspecified turbulence; staring back, they engage us in a grim familial and cultural authority. The presentation of a racially specific sexuality is particularly challenging in Lillian Mulero's image of a tattooed nude, positioned in the painting field like a dusky-skinned anthropological object. Fondling his penis and grinning broadly, the figure confronts male and female viewers with a provocative layering of exoticism and eroticized "othernesses".

Inverting the conventional emphasis on the female body, *Post-Boys & Girls* highlights the male nude as a deconstructive signifier of masculinity. In *Self-Portrait as Nude Woman with a Clown Nose* (both guises are indignities), Lee Gordon dislocates the body's gender marks. The presumed femininity of a passive figure, arms hidden, the pale breasts almost like musculature, the genitals bikinied and hidden—all of these cast sexual identities exquisitely adrift and invite us to speculate on their certainties. Greg Davidek also plays with gender's visual language by fragmenting masculine "wholeness" and distributing parts of the male body into panels of primer-like signs. These and other pictures in the exhibition—even Drasler's jaunty fedoras tossed in the breeze, suggest a masculinity ill at ease with its own authority, and self-consciously so.

Suspicious woman that I am, I face these images with pleasure and a wary curiosity. They resonate with familiarly male combinations of power, vulnerability and charm. But they also call up another dilemma: the place of bourgeois masculinity in the chorus of

multi-cultural subjectivities. Is this claim to critique the very masculinity that empowers them not disingenuous?<sup>9</sup> Can white men have anything to say about masculine authority and its patriarchal construction that is not simply a guilty confession or a chastened, petulant whine? Is Aptekar's painted chivalric conversation, *Fuck me? Fuck you.* more than a prettily patterned joke? Or do these hooded monsters, armored knights, and flying fedoras disturb the macho assumptions of power they invoke?

Engaging gender issues in these ways, *Post-Boys & Girls* avoids a utopian complacency and struggles for equal ground. No doubt, as white bourgeois masculinity loses some of its privilege, it will tighten its grip with even more vicious racisms and misogynies—the comedy routines of Andrew Dice Clay or the rap-taunts of 2 *Live Crew* are two current examples. But with this show as evidence, it is important to see an other term in this gender discourse, and to recognize the humor, pain and confusion embedded in "new masculinities."

The exhibition thus stakes out charged and risky territory, even as it is threatened with loss. For if debates about "cultural tribalism" persist, coinciding with media representation of Middle Eastern "tribalisms", we will surely be Bush-whacked with more cultural muzzling in the democracy's name. For the moment, painting is alive, well and still kicking; *Post-Boys & Girls* extends its possibilities with humor and urgency.

1. Douglas Crimp, "The End of Painting," and Benjamin Buchloh, "Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Repression; Notes on the Return of Representation in European Painting," both in *October* 16 (Spring 1981), pp. 69-86 and Hal Foster, "Against Pluralism," and "Between Modernism and the Media," in *Recodings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics*, Port Townsend, Bay Press, 1985, pp. 13-58.

2. Buchloh made this argument about work by Chia, Clemente, Kiefer. "Figures of Authority."

3. Buchloh, "Figures of Authority," p.132, and Foster, "Modernism and Media," p.41.
4. Foster, "Against Pluralism," p. 24
5. "From Trivial Pursuit to the Art of the Ideal: Art Making in the Eighties," *The Decade Show: Frameworks of Identity in the 1980s*, New York, 1990, p.64.
6. There is widespread anxiety about this position across several disciplines. For a clear statement of the issue for feminists, see Nancy K. Miller, "Changing the Subject: Authorship, Writing, and the Reader," in Teresa de Lauretis, ed. *Feminist Studies, Critical Studies*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1986, pp. 102-120.
7. Foster, "Against Pluralism," and "For a Concept of the Political in Contemporary Art," in *Recordings*, pp. 139-156.
8. Richard Bernstein, "The Arts catches up with a Society in Disarray," *The New York Times*, Sunday, September 9, 1990, Section 2, pp. 1ff.
9. For a thorough discussion of this dilemma among literary scholars, see Alice Jardine and Paul Smith, eds., *Men in Feminism* (New York, Methuen, Inc., 1987), and in particular, Jardine's lucid comments in "Men in Feminism: Odor di Uomo or Compagnons de Route," pp. 54-61.

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## ***Post-Boys & Girls: Men & Women?***

*by Michael S. Kimmel*

The title of this exhibition, *Post-Boys & Girls*, suggests several possible interpretations. It could mean that we're beyond our childhoods, grown men and women, taking on the adult responsibilities of producing adult art. Or it could refer to some new "post" movement, as if we are the post-modern, post-structuralist post-boys and post-girls.

I'm struck by another meaning of the phrase. To declare the exhibition "Post-Boys & Girls" is to suggest a way of seeing ourselves that goes beyond thinking that who we are is stamped indelibly on us the moment some doctor announces "it's a boy" or "it's a girl." Our personalities, our experiences and our interactions with one another have more to do with the cultural meanings attached to our reproductive biology than with that biological equipment itself. It's as though these artists are claiming that we must see beyond boys and girls, beyond male and female, to those creatures whose lives are shaped by the cultures in which they live. Let's call them men and women.

Gender is one of the central axes around which our social life revolves. Not "sex," the biological given, but "gender," the set of meanings that cultures give to those biological facts. Gender is as critical in establishing and expressing our identities as class or race, a foundation upon which individual personalities are built.

What's more, our gender identities, our experience of masculinity and femininity proceeds not from biological imperatives — boys will be boys — but from those cultural expectations. Gender is socially constructed. "One is not born a woman," claimed Simone de Beauvoir. "One *becomes* a woman." And we become women and men by learning the culturally prescribed roles that women and men are assigned in our culture.