

Art in America

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ELLEN HARVEY

By Jennifer Coates

What makes flesh sexual, beautiful, comical? Ellen Harvey explored the consequences of nudity in porn, art and mass-produced kitsch in her recent exhibition "The Nudist Museum Gift Shop." The result was a rewarding confusion of desires: Harvey invited the viewer into a series of reveries about who wants what, and why.

On the first floor of the gallery, you entered the gift shop portion of the show. Long shelves lining the perimeter contained small paintings of thrift-store objects incorporating nude (mostly female) bodies. Purchased on eBay, these objects included mugs, lamps, salt-and-pepper shakers and ashtrays. Why were these items, ranging from simply decorative to insanely vulgar, made? Who gets lured into buying one and being satisfied somehow by its presence? My favorite was *Nude Hitler Penis Ashtray* (all 2012). In most cases, the nude becomes a residual flourish: a moment that might once have been sexy or perverse degrades into a trivial monument. It was amusing to consider the forces of desire that roil under the surface of the objects that jam our homes, all the while being reminded that the gallery is as much a shop as a place to view art.

On the way downstairs to the lower gallery were two small clusters of works on the walls. In *New York Nudes* (2012), Harvey has crosshatched out the backgrounds of postcards of famous paintings from New York City art museums, leaving only the figures to star in the foreground. The second, titled *Missing Bits* (2012), is a grouping of watercolors of porn shots in which large ovals block the crux of the action.

In the downstairs gallery, *The Nudist Museum* (2010), a project Harvey originally did at the Bass Museum of Art in Miami, filled a wall salon-style with over 50 paintings and was cordoned off by a velvet rope. Harvey copied every nude figure in the Bass Museum's collection (men, women and babies appearing in paintings, sculptures and drawings, from medieval to modern). She cropped extraneous elements from the originals and painted the backgrounds gray; the figures are a sickly sort of yellowish peach tone. The paintings have ornate frames and the paint bleeds out onto them in a self-conscious nod to the viewer, suggesting that these aren't the precious devotional efforts of, say, an art student. The images seem to be soiling themselves, letting the muck of history flow out and stain current reality. The paintings are hung on top of pages from gay and straight porn and fashion magazines, creating a tension between nudity and nakedness—the idealized figure as allegory, vehicle for expression and object of devotion versus the naked body as igniter of sexual urges, provider of physical satisfaction.

In this show, Harvey explored the unruly relationship between picture space and real space, the sacred and the vulgar, the consumer and the connoisseur.

IMAGE: View of Ellen Harvey's *The Nudist Museum*, 2010, oil on gesso board with woodshop frames and contemporary magazines, dimensions variable, at Dodge Gallery.