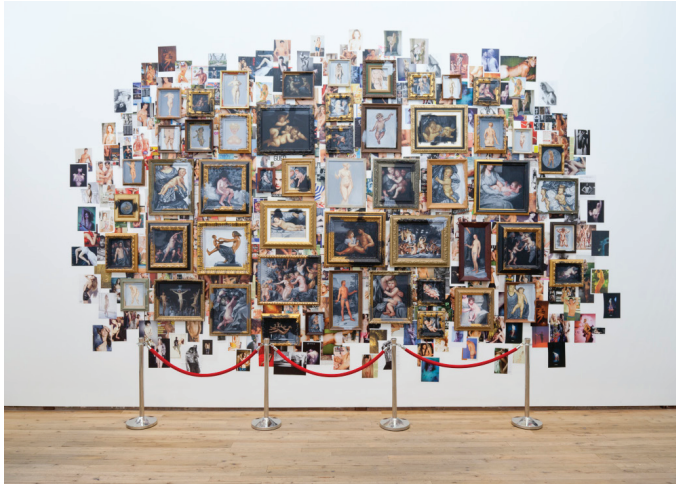


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Ellen Harvey
THE NUDIST MUSEUM GIFT SHOP
by Jane Dickson

Visitors enter Ellen Harvey's gleeful Nudist Museum the same way they exit -- through the gift shop. So begin by browsing long rows of small oil paintings, smoky oil renderings of any eBay wares that incorporated the corporeal. Nude saltshakers, nude vases, nude lamps, nude clocks, boob-shaped cups and even glass tables with naked lady bases, organized by subject and lined up side-by-side along both walls of the long space. Each delicate pastel-hued image looms out of a dark grainy background, whose paint washes are echoed on the walls, definitely a painter's idea of interior design.

Saucy and eccentric, Harvey's subjects were originally designed to seduce, and they still hold a certain temptation. They whisper their siren call, "You know you want me. . .," and reflexively, we do. But wait, we ask ourselves, is this shopping or art appreciation?

Around a corner one passes an open bathroom filled with rear-lit scratched mirrors, offering up fractured glimpses of our un-idealized selves alongside a rack filled with Cubist postcards. Harvey has performed a kind of reverse censorship on works by Picasso, Braque and the rest of the gang, cross-hatching out everything except the nude figures. More censorship is suggested by a series of "Naughty Bits" watercolors, pale images based on pornography, but with all the action excised by decorous oval voids.

Then we come to the Nudist Museum itself. Intentionally muddling sacred and profane, Harvey has painted an idiosyncratic version of every nude painting in the European paintings collection at the Bass Museum of Art in Miami Beach. These new renditions are displayed in thrift-shop gilt frames over a wallpaper collage of figures from fashion and porn magazines, cordoned off by a thick red velvet rope.

In Harvey's paintings, only the flesh is pink-toned. Everything else is gray, backgrounds and drapery, with skittering swathes of gray paint splayed casually onto the frames, like hazy wisps of stray memory. Stripped of their context, these baby Jesuses, martyrs and nymphs have become changelings, familiar but not quite, tempting us to grope through the "name that artist" game for moorings.

Doubly crowding her new "old masters," Harvey has casually cropped the original compositions to fit their new hand-me-down frames. She packs these nudes densely into an unruly mob on the wall, where they jostle for our attention. The downsized gods have been humbled, while the knick-knacks have been turned into icons of desire. In Harvey's Nudist Museum, it's clear that the Gift Shop rules.

Ellen Harvey, "The Nudist Museum Gift Shop," Feb. 23-Apr. 1, 2012, at Dodge Gallery, 15 Rivington Street, New York, N.Y. 10012.

- JANE DICKSON