

The Opposite of Voyeurism

NY Arts Interviews Ellen Harvey at Dodge Gallery

NY ARTS: This recent body of work at Dodge Gallery references history, kitsch and the body in a declarative manner. Do you see these as voyeuristic?

Ellen Harvey: I think these works are about the opposite of voyeurism. Voyeurism for me is about intruding into someone else's private world -- the forbidden thrill of spying out what another would prefer to keep private. The nude, by comparison, is all about display. It's out there for everyone to see. These are naked bodies that exist for the sole purpose of being looked at. They exist as public objects of desire, even if they sometimes appropriate the settings of the voyeuristic experience in order to make them seem more transgressive or seductive.



The Nudist Museum Gift Shop paintings in particular are of "useful" objects that happen to have had the nude attached to them in order to make them more desirable. Of course since they're all for sale on Ebay they're all failed objects of desire -- someone is trying to get rid of them.

NY ARTS: How do you personally define pornography? Is your work - specifically the installation in the lower gallery of historical nudes, fashion nudes and pornographic nudes - a comment on our shifting depiction of the body? If so, what is the statement?

EH: I'm not sure I have a definition of pornography, in the sense of drawing a distinction between images. I can't look at an image and decide if it is pornographic or if it is art. To be frank, I'm not sure that this is a valid or important distinction. What is clear is that there is a whole pornography industry out there producing sexually explicit images for mass consumption-and often exploiting people in the process-and there exists an art world that spends a great deal of time producing images and experiences that it defines as art. These are self-defining social spaces that sometimes produce work or experiences that look quite similar and more often don't. What interests me is that I see them both as socially "safe" places for desire, sexual and otherwise.

I think the art nude is interesting because it conflates the larger inchoate desires that art attempts to harness with sexual desire. Think of all those jokes about artists and their models. The general public thinks of art as space where desire can be made manifest. Of course, it also trivializes and infantilizes art and artists in an attempt to make that less threatening. Imagine a society where everyone got to express themselves.

NY ARTS: It would be a very different world. By exposing nudity to the public, do you feel that the mysterious and intriguing quality that often results from concealment is rendered obsolete?

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EH: I think our relationship to our bodies is very complicated. We all live inside them. They are the most familiar thing to us in the world. And yet we spend a lot of time covering them up or obsessing about the fact that they don't conform to our current standard of attractiveness - that's why I put the Self-Loathing Mirrors in the bathroom of the gallery. If we lived in a society where we were all naked or where we weren't constantly exposed to mass media nudity, I imagine we'd feel quite differently about our bodies. As a child growing up in 70's England, I loved going to art museums precisely because they were the only place I got to see naked people. I think we are all naturally drawn to the naked body -- the human race would probably end otherwise. . .



NY ARTS: The way you pair nudity and art history is very interesting; is it a reactionary position to our contemporary view of nudity? Or do you see them working hand in hand?

EH: I think the past produces the present; our present day highly idealized and sexualized display nude is the direct offspring of the art historical nude, even if they appear to be quite different. Historically the nude has had more than one meaning -- Truth was generally nude to show that she had nothing to hide, the baby Jesus was often nude to show that he was truly "made flesh," children were often shown as naked and innocent and of course the nude has always existed for the purpose of titillation. Standards of beauty have also changed considerably, although that may also have had something to do with the fact that when people saw less nudity they were possibly more accepting of what people really look like when they take off their clothes. It's interesting that even though the art historical display nude has generally been seen as an idealized version of the "naked", it's still shows a considerably wider array of body types than the the nudes with which we are bombarded today. Paradoxically although the mass media nude consists of images of real naked people, they are all so similar that they do seem "nude" rather than "naked." Its as if they all put on one extended "nude" suit and then went to work. And the meaning of this body is almost exclusively sexual. That's probably why we don't see naked babies or children all over the Western mass media -- people would be horrified.

NY ARTS: The title of your exhibit "The Nudist Museum" is telling. Does it undermine the individuality of every frame, painting? Looking over your work, especially projects like "The New York Beautification Project", I wonder how important is it to read your work as a whole as opposed to singular pieces?

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EH: I like to think of art as a place where you are free to have an incoherent conversation -- where you are not restricted to having to defend just one point of view. A good art work for me supports many contradictory meanings -- all of which I mean quite sincerely. It can be easier to create that sort of experience with more than just one object so I often work on a project by project basis with each project including a number of traditionally singular art objects. I like exploring cliches of art production and one way to do that is to take what appears to be very familiar art experiences and to destabilize them by changing their context. In the case of "The New York Beautification Project", that meant contrasting the picturesque landscape with graffiti and having a career as a tagger; that's not something I could have achieved with just one intervention.

With "The Nudist Museum", I wanted to oppose the art historical nude with the mass media nude so I painted copies of every nude art work in the Bass Museum's collection. The paintings are all painted from documentation, cropped to accentuate the nude, colorized so that the nudes are flesh colored and the back grounds are painted in grisaille with the painting spilling over onto their thrift shop frames and then hung over pages from pornographic, fitness and fashion magazines. It's one piece, one experience that offers a lot of different "nude" options. The "Nudist Museum Gift Shop" by contrast, is an open ended installation of paintings of all the non-art objects which came up for sale when I typed in the word "nude" to Ebay. They are individually for sale. It wouldn't be much of a gift shop if they weren't.