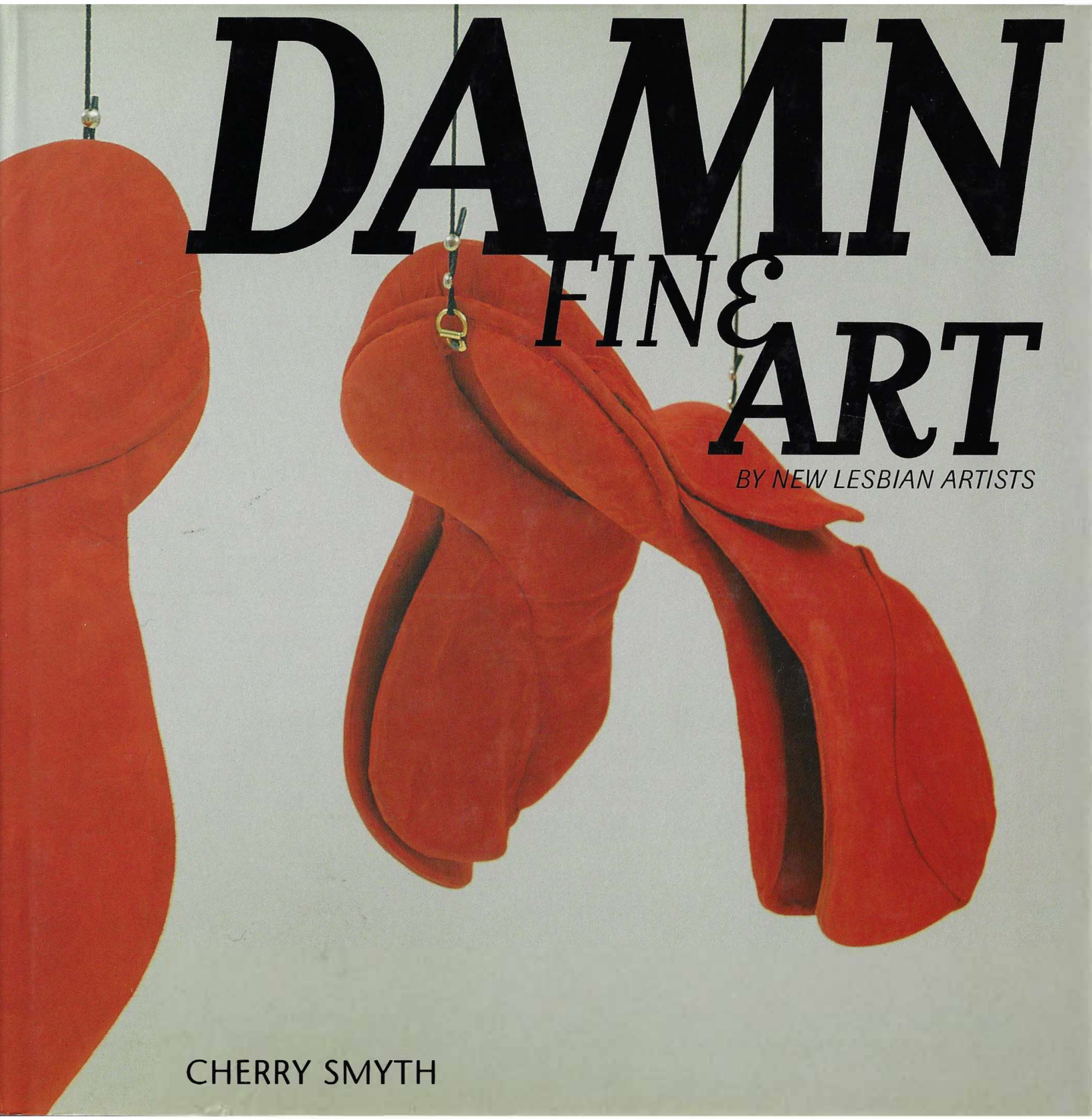

DAMN FINE ART

BY NEW LESBIAN ARTISTS

CHERRY SMYTH

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CASSELL

CONTents

*INTRO*duction

When this project first began, it was intended to critique the emergence of recent visual art by lesbians that could be dubbed 'queer' – confrontational, anti-assimilationist, provocative work that transgressed the idea of what 'lesbian art' could be. The elegant, camp portraiture of Sadie Lee, the frank, sexy photography of Della Grace, Nicole Eisenman's exuberant, painterly murals and the richly coloured, transgender photographic studies by Catherine Opie, to name a few, seemed to share an approach which gloried in exploding the positive imagery of 1980s identity politics and honouring formal art historical traditions, while wildly subverting conventional content. These and other unashamedly out artists are not only gaining recognition from the mainstream art world, but are doing it on their own terms.

While feminist and lesbian artists tried to cohere around a fixed notion of sexual identity in the 1970s, many contemporary queer artists are located around an agreed sense of the mutability of identity and gender, a questioning of what 'lesbian/dyke' is, was and will become. As curator Lawrence Rinder asserts,

> ***While the present moment seems to mark an historic watershed for gay and lesbian art, this extraordinary creativity may be happening not because of a solidifying of gay and lesbian identity, but precisely because of a crisis in that identity.***[1]

Research for the book, however, soon revealed how restrictive a vision based on an assumption of transgression would be and opened up a wealth of excellent work that was neither aligned with the recent queer adventure, nor with the essentializing definitions of lesbian art inherited from lesbian cultural feminism, but rather was informed largely by white, male fine art traditions. Is this work 'less lesbian' because it does not wear its cunt on its canvas?

Critics have often pitted 'essentialist', 1970s body art against 'deconstructivist', postmodern 1980s art as if they were the only practices, while much work exists outside these parameters or shifts between them. Since earlier lesbian feminist art has often been characterized reductively as being replete with confessional narratives framed by unfurling flowerbuds and tampon collages, I wanted to avoid the homogenisation of contemporary art by lesbians under a rubric of 'bad girls' or dysfunctional sexual alienation and abjection, which appears to be the current curatorial strategy for much lesbian work. The theatrically militant methods for subverting the good lesbian mama stereotype have become something of an institution in themselves. Isn't a fifty-something artist producing neo-expressionist, landscape-vulvic oils in Ireland as queer as an 'in your face' twenty-something pop artist making pierced pussy prints in LA.?

'Queer' is more than a radical attitude, a fashion statement and a noun. 'Queering' the art world or approaches to art practices will involve disrupting many different contextual frameworks and will only happen if artists extend beyond a rebel margin that is easily co-opted and then dismissed. As Harmony Hammond suggests, some younger artists have become appropriated as the lesbian spectacle in return for brief visibility in the mainstream media. They have tried, she argues,

> ***to 'outqueer' each other, deny our creative histories and feed into the art market and a conservative, xenophobic political agenda . . . [This] . . . commodifying is a violent dynamic that other groups who have been first marginalised and then rediscovered on the basis of their difference have had to negotiate. But it is new to us. Just how much real pussy power will be allowed remains to be 'seen'.***[2]

'Lesbian chic' often says more about heterosexual anxiety and the domestication of dangerous desire than about lesbian equality.

Rather than argue for the existence of a lesbian aesthetic sensibility, or even try to define what 'lesbian art' is, I have asked 'What are artists who define themselves as lesbians doing in their work and how does that extend knowledge and understanding of the world from a lesbian perspective?' Our sensibilities are as multiple as our wardrobes, though we undoubtedly share codes and signifiers of how difference has determined our interaction with mainstream art practice and culture. Just as Louise Bourgeois' work may be discussed in terms of 'gendered abstraction', certain work by lesbian artists could be spoken of as 'homoerotic abstraction'. This however insinuates a sexualized content which determines a specific reading, a coming together of two or more lesbian bodies and reduces the work to merely being read as sexual. The work selected here is much more diverse and multi-layered than a simple 'homoerotic' reading would allow. For some artists, lesbianism is obliquely referenced, for others, it is the substance of their work.

I would argue that queer art can be produced by non-homosexuals, yet somewhat old-fashionedly I have decided to not include work by men or straight women. As 'lesbian' is increasingly subsumed by 'queer', which is taken to mean 'gay, white male', I chose to retain and exalt that old, awkward term, 'lesbian', while presenting artists who identify as lesbian, dyke, gay and/or queer and may or may not have sex with men. This approach will be criticized for compounding the ghettoization of the politics of sexuality at a time when queer promised that the boundaries between homosexual and heterosexual, normal and perverse would have been thoroughly reworked

and sexual identity would not be as hinged to sexual practice as it once was. Indeed, sexuality being the fluid, unfixed entity that it is, right before going to print, Christina Berry, one of the artists discussed below, asked me to mention that she has recently begun to identify as bisexual.

A glance at the statistics garnered by The Guerrilla Girls proves that the art world largely rejects women's art and persists in naming 'the other' as separate and inferior, as Felix Gonzales-Torres points out:

> ***When you have a show with white, straight painters, you don't call it that. That would be absurd, right? That's just 'not natural'. But if you have four black lesbian sculptors from Brooklyn, that's exactly what you call it — 'Four African-American Lesbians From Brooklyn'.***[3]

Thus I want to create a distinct focus on a particular historical moment and on the discourses and circumstances that contribute to an understanding of the current energy and excitement generated by lesbian art. As Homi Bhabha regarding black and Asian work, asserts:

> ***For emergent communities or the practitioners of new art forms, it is often a historical and psychic necessity to depend for their creative sustenance on a communal response (often contestatory) from an 'interest group' or interpretative community.***[4]

The selection is far from definitive and much more Eurocentric than I had hoped. If white lesbian art is disparate, dispersed and under-documented, then work by artists of colour is a hundred times more so. Being white, I do not have automatic access to the word-of-mouth networks in the black communities that this kind of pioneering research relies on. Although I attended a small show by black British lesbians in 1993 and made contact with a lesbian group based in Delhi, I did not find substantial bodies of new work. I have no doubt that it exists and I appreciate the willingness of the artists of colour I did find to be included in this volume.

Some of the black and Asian women I spoke to, such as US-based Laura Irene Wayne have developed a form of commercial craft from their art practice and abandoned attempts to be accepted by the closed economy of the largely white art world. However, I made a decision early in my research not to include 'crafts'. One of the artists interviewed who works as a potter making crockery, as well as a sculptor under another name, gave a useful definition which became one of my criteria. 'With craft, I know the outcome, whereas with art, I don't.' For similar reasons I did not include some of the very fine graphic designer artists, such as UK-based lesbian partnership Huntley Muir.

Since there is a danger in writing as though lesbian art has just been discovered, as 'women's art' is heralded as 'new' in every decade (note the amount of deserved attention given to young British painter Jenny Saville who paints large female nudes), the term 'new' of the title is not synonymous with young, but with a vitality and willingness to be out and engage with the established art world and a larger visual culture. Thus I have included a seventy-nine-year-old artist whose work reflects a distinct trend very much in response to ecological concerns of this historical period.

One of the criteria for including artists in this volume was that they had had at least one solo show. In most

cases I managed to interview the artists directly and quotes from them, unless otherwise credited, originate from those interviews. Others answered questionnaires by post. Although only some of the artists are represented by galleries, most aspire to mainstream exposure. None make work simply for private consumption or for a lesbian audience alone.

The groupings are idiosyncratic and somewhat arbitrary. Some work is gathered together in art historical manner, such as figuration in chapter one 'This Body is Mine'; other work is arranged in a more sociological or ideological fashion, such as chapter four 'What Remains', which examines work which embodies a strong sense of loss. Chapter three 'Hijackers' profiles artists who have appropriated other artists' styles, trespassing into and pilfering from other heritages and making them their own. Chapter two 'Vulva Goes to School and Discovers She Doesn't Exist' brings together artists who push the limits of mainstream representations of the body. Chapter five 'Mean Streets' presents work intervening on a street level and work that is heavily informed by the urban landscape. Chapter six 'Material Seduction' collates work that is informed by the theoretical concerns of conceptual and abstract art, while seeking to sustain a more accessible crossover practice through irony, humour or sensuality. Comix artists, furniture painters and an artist who works in rubber and latex are in chapter seven 'Cartoonesque'. Finally, chapter eight 'Parallel Worlds' highlights printmakers, sculptors and digital artists who imagine post-gender beings or surreal creatures inhabiting alternative universes.

The scope of the book is non time-based art such as painting, sculpture, comix, digital art, and multi-media installation work. I have sadly not been able to include the vibrant, iconoclastic work in performance art, live art and film and video that informs and encourages this work. This is also the area where most young artists of colour can be found. Video artists like Sadie Benning, Cheryl Dunye, Jocelyn Taylor and Shu Lea Chang and performers like Holly Hughes, Carmelita Tropicana, Pamela Sneed and Split Britches represent the forefront of formal innovation and diverse dyke expression. I also chose to de-emphasize lesbian photography as this field has been more extensively researched, exhibited and critiqued than the other dyke media in texts like *Stolen Glances*, edited by Tessa Boffin and Jean Fraser (Pandora, 1991) and *Nothing But the Girl* edited by Susie Bright and Jill Posener (Cassell, 1996). Contemporary photographers are indebted to, among others, the pioneering work of Tee Corinne, Honey Lee Cottrell, Jill Posener, Nina Levitt, Phyllis Christopher, Morgan Gwenwald and Deborah Bright.

At the risk of compounding the cultural amnesia bemoaned by an older generation of lesbian artists and critics, *Damn Fine Art by New Lesbian Artists* focuses on work produced in the last decade. The visibility of lesbian artists now would not have been possible without the ground-breaking careers of many lesbian artists in the 1970s, most of whom remain severely under documented, especially in Europe. The genre itself is still in its infancy, as Arlene Raven suggests:

> ***Until the early 1970s, there was no body of work that could be called lesbian art — the result of a painful conspiracy of silence between fearful lesbians and homophobic society.***[5]

Many feminist art shows did not celebrate specifically lesbian work and it was not until the *Heresies* Number 3 issue, 'Lesbian Art and Artists', was published in 1977 and the Great American Lesbian Art Show in 1980, that lesbian art was recognised as a separate entity. Even then, as Harmony Hammond attests , 'proclaiming oneself as

a lesbian artist was an act of protest'.[6] Lesbians, she goes on to say, 'were essential in focusing the questions: What is female? What is feminine? What is a woman?' but were perceived as a liability by the straight Women's Movement. In the UK, although there were small mixed Gay Pride exhibitions in which wome were drastically under represented, there was no significant, specifically lesbian art show until the London-based Lesbian Artists Network Show in 1992.

Homophobia among straight feminist curators still flourishes. A recent substantial issue of *Art in Australia* devoted to 'Women's Art' omitted any reference to lesbian art or artists. One writer's comment on the plight of women's art in general is sharpened by an unwitting irony when she attests, 'It is a worrying act to be always arriving, to be perennially "new" and yet constantly "ignored" and "excluded"'.[7]

A failure to honour a lesbian lineage is not simply a wilful dehistoricisation among younger artists and critics, but often a lack of access to the lineage itself, which has been victim of sexist and homophobic neglect. Straight feminist artist Miriam Shapiro, who has been painting since the 1960s, asks, 'Why am I seeing the art of my generation being created anew each decade?'[8] She goes on to conclude that, 'in the absence of representations, of icons, of memory, contemporary women artists are condemned endlessly to repeat the ills of survival in the patriarchy. . . . Each generation opens the wounds, which close in the night behind them.'

However, in discussing broader issues of feminist art, art critic Liz Kotz argues against

> ***creating false genealogies for work in the present . . . . Much of the most interesting work by women artists in the past ten years or so never fit dominant '80s' paradigms of feminist postmodernism or clearly articulated political oppositionality. That's why a lot of this work is only detonating into the present now.***[9]

Sculptural work by Jaya Schürch or Linda Matalon, examined below, owes more to Brancusi and Eva Hesse respectively, than to lesbian sculptors like Harmony Hammond. Mandy McCartin's oil painting echoes German Expressionists like Otto Dix more than it references, for example, Louise Fishman, although both have used text in their work. Ingrid Pollard's photographs bear little sign of being influenced by 1970s lesbian photographers and are instead indebted to a black, largely political photographic tradition.

Some artists interviewed here cite Georgia O'Keefe and Frida Kahlo as their main sources of inspiration, even though their work rarely reflects the style of either artist. Others have found the work of gay male artists from Felix Gonzales-Torres to Robert Mapplethorpe more influential than 'feminist art', which often excluded lesbians, or from 'lesbian feminist art', which was often censorial and rejected anti-essentialist depictions of lesbian sexuality.

Emerging lesbian artists have adopted a very different set of priorities and strategies from those of their predecessors. While lesbian feminist artists were largely concerned with creating a counter-culture, distinct and separate from the male-dominated art world and rejected notions of explicit sexual representations which risked arousing men, new lesbian artists are engaging with popular culture, medical texts, pornography, comix and art history, analysing their identity within and in relation to their cultural and historical contexts. Significantly, they are no longer allowing their own sexual subjectivities to be limited by fear of male objectification or a self-loathing erotophobia. They are more willing, and able to negotiate the dilemma of being exhibited in a heterosexist, homophobic art world.

But the stigma attached to specifically lesbian culture persists despite the sunny healthiness of the acceptable lesbian lovers on the 1993 *Newsweek* cover, or the ironic posturing of k. d. lang and Cindy on the cover of *Vanity Fair*. Indeed one artist who has participated in mixed lesbian and gay shows declined to be included in this collection which she perceived as 'labelling' her work. 'Lesbian' is not only regarded as more reductive, but as more damaging, in terms of career prospects, than 'queer'. In mixed queer arenas, one imagines, there is still room for a protective sexual ambiguity for lesbian artists not available to those working in lesbian-only groups. Since the gay press is mostly edited by gay men, those lesbians working with gay men in theatre, dance and film, from independent producer Christine Vachon to Lois Weaver of Gay Sweatshop Theatre, tend to receive more attention.

Although Harmony Hammond insists that 'these days it's easy to be a queer artist. It's in to be out',[10] only about 10 per cent of the artists included here are able to survive from sales and commissions of their work. The lesbian artists' boom enjoyed in SoHo galleries in New York and to a lesser extent in Los Angeles, honours only a chosen few and has not spread to Europe or elsewhere. For many, the need for support simply to be a woman artist in fine art supersedes their needs as lesbians, which go almost wholly unaddressed. Either blatant homophobia or prescriptiveness about what a 'lesbian artist' should produce, dogs many dyke artists in their college years. Some stop depicting female nudes; others, like Sadie Lee, drop out and work in isolation. Censorship continues to curtail the exhibition of many artists, including Catherine Opie, Della Grace and Christina Berry, whose work is rarely seen in Britain, but embraced in Scandinavia. Artists of colour are totally under-exhibited. Despite the wave of soap opera and magazine visibility of lesbians, as Caffyn Kelley concludes, 'All lesbian images are still weighted with the burden and responsibility of scarcity.'[11]

To older lesbian artists, some of the contemporary work may feel like reinventing the wheel, but lesbian artists in the 1990s are also reconstituting formal parameters with new energy, merging social and political concerns with purely aesthetic ones. As Liz Kotz confirms, 'Around lesbian and gay practices in particular, there's been a real convergence of art, activism and theoretical work, with nothing like a consensus of opinion.'[12]

The 1990s have brought queer destabilization of the construction of gender and sexual identity and pushed the frontiers of what constitutes art. Lesbian artists are well placed to explore, renegotiate and confound both the sexual site and the formal means with which to express it, as they fluctuate between high and low art, between the margins and the mainstream. Indeed Nayland Blake has suggested that because of the lack of 'a place where autonomous gay culture could be made, gay men are continually in the position of having to take items from the outside world and make them gay, make them speak clearly', with an added camp or revised sexual reading, which he claims has been a 'sort of model for postmodern culture'.[13]

Hal Foster argues that 'marginality is not always disempowerment. It can be a privileged space of aesthetic transgression, of political transformation.'[14] The growing presence of uncompromised lesbian artists in museums and galleries, especially in America, and to a lesser extent in Europe, shows those who were nurtured by the margins bringing knowledge gained in that 'privileged space' like a time bomb into mainstream art. Their interventions herald the coming of age of an avant-garde which has wrung the juice out of identity politics and speaks to an audience which is not determined by who gets it wet or hard, and is prepared to have its attitudes and expectations displaced. While some of the work is allusive, clever, opinionated, and much of it is funny, direct and sexy, all of it is damn fine art.

chapter 3

HIJACKERS

A picture is a tissue of quotations drawn from innumerable centres.
Sherrie Levine[1]

This chapter profiles artists who relish in appropriating images and styles from other genres, other artists, and/or popular culture. Photographer Laurence Jaugey-Paget steals her slick style from the glamour of Hollywood in the 1930s, while Sadie Lee, Veronica Slater and Nicole Eisenman ably parody 'Old Masters', from Michelangelo to Manet and Picasso. Painter Deborah Kass pays explicit homage to pop icon Andy Warhol, while Patricia Cronin references the 1970s work of Joan Semmel. Tom of Finland is satirized in the fantasy drawings of G. B. Jones.

Appropriation is largely perceived as a postmodern strategy – creating a self-conscious replica of a replica of an illusion, denying the originality of the artist, which was considered to be of paramount importance in Modernism. But copying 'Old Masters' and reworking traditional, often religious themes, are long-honoured teaching methods. Archetypes are created by reiteration.

'Pop artists in the late 1950s and early 1960s began to challenge the notion of abstraction as objective and neutral. Pillaging fine art, media images and advertising, artists like Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, Robert Rauschenberg and Larry Rivers challenged the sanctity of high art icons and critiqued an increasingly consumerist society. As Amanda Farr maintains, these works 'possessed an irreverent humour and irony which served to undermine the myth of the artist as inspired creator and the spectator as one engaged in the contemplation of timeless, subliminal aesthetics'.[2]

While many feminist artists in the 1970s, who did not have the language to critique the values of patriarchy that had subordinated them, tried to invent a new language and legitimized craft as art, others also used mimicry as a form of critique. Influenced by poststructuralism, artists like Cindy Sherman, Barbara Kruger and Sherrie Levine used a cool irony to deconstruct the dominant ideology of the white, male, author/artist with his sublime expression of individualism. As Mira Schor elaborates, the debate was as divisive then as it remains now about whether scavenging from and re-presenting art by male artists threatens the phallocracy or merely confirms it.

It was felt that women artists who tried to create 'original' images of women, particularly positive ones, were deluding themselves: such efforts were doomed to relapse into unconscious stereotypes created by patriarchy. The best strategy was consciously to cull images from patriarchy's repertory and deconstruct them through ingenious juxtapositions and changed contexts.[3]

With increasingly accessible, enhanced methods of reproduction, from photoshop to CD-ROMs, artists using appropriation continue to question the effectiveness and uniqueness of the original image. By heightening the commodification of art from the postcard to media advertising, these artists attempt to reinvest the image with power, not only by subverting the values of art history, but by honouring the skills and iconography of the tradition from which they borrow and endowing it, and the quoted image, with renewed energy and relevance.

Often dismissed as making art about male art, or being too self-referential, the appropriation strategy used by artists discussed below is neither arbitrary about its target of appropriation nor one-dimensional in the scope of its references. As Susan Kandel points out, those who mime the forms of patriarchal power 'put the gaze on display – and thereby make it accountable'.[4]

Judith Halberstam also defends an appropriationist strategy, arguing that the arena for oppositional ideas has shifted from being counter-cultural to one that engages vigorously with mainstream culture as a form of resistance. Rather than attack postmodernism for not being political enough, Halberstam argues that we should chastise political activism for not being postmodern enough.[5]

PATRICIA CRONIN

While Slater and Eisenman borrow from Renaissance masters, and Kass replays Pop Art references, Patricia Cronin uses a much later model as her material. Recalling feminist artist Joan Semmel's *Fuck Paintings* 1971–73, Cronin photographs herself and her lover fucking from her own point of view and then reproduces the image in luscious watercolours ***(Fig.18)***. Like Semmel, who was once her tutor, Cronin uses bruisey pale browns and yellows as skin shades and evokes at once the tenderness and vigour of sex. While Semmel's images offered a revolutionary perspective of sex from a woman's viewpoint in the 1970s, Cronin's content is still considered shocking in the mainstream art world.

Folds of flesh and curved body parts are often so tightly crushed into the portrait that it looks like there are more than two bodies in the frame. There are no pencil outlines to give hard-edged definition, which also heightens the merging multiplicity of making love. Some show explicit, mutual hand-fucking or dildo-sucking, the mouths soft and full, while others offer a more amorphous collapse and collide of flesh. In one, a crouched body pushes its ass to the viewer invitingly, or a figure is framed removing her underwear. The bodies are usually indistinguishable as subject/object positions are dissolved and the symmetrical pattern evokes an abstract motif. Loose bodies celebrate the unidealized ordinariness of the women's bodies. The close-up perspective allows the viewer to experience the claustrophobic urgency and mirrored sensation of breast on breast, vulva on vulva.

Cronin transforms the watercolour, traditionally associated with femininity and pretty, pastoral scenes into a dynamic, quietly confrontational medium. 'My main interest is in making imagery that would approximate a lesbian's sexual focus', maintains Cronin.

> ***I have found that acceptance and celebration of things sapphic exist only as long as they remain within the confines of phallocentricity. In this 1990s' era of Generation X's slacker art of the abjected, rejected and dejected self, loving adult intimacy is highly suspect.***[14]

Cronin goes on to explain how her work is hidden out of sight by one straight female collector, while another dealer, again a straight woman, told Cronin that it would be difficult work for her collectors, 'because it doesn't have the pathology of the lesbian in it'. As Cronin concludes, 'for people to like my work, they are going to have to like women'. This work has none of the accusatory edginess of what is considered queer - but its soft, frank erotics sneakily undercut the traditional content of the watercolour medium.

Fig. 18. Patricia Cronin ***Untitled #115*** *(1994) Watercolour (23 x 20")*