

The Flesh is Weak

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Two recent exhibitions attempt to go beyond the conventions of feminist art and its characterisation of the gendered viewer. The aim of the organisers of *Bad Girls* at the I.C.A. is to stage a reaction against what they describe as the 'didactic feminism' of Sherman, Kruger and Holzer, while *Elective Affinities* at the Tate Gallery, Liverpool questions the exclusive concentration on the viewer's gender in depictions of the body. Neither show, however, quite lives up to its premises.

Bad Girls is an assemblage of extremely diverse 'post-feminist' artists, some of whom really are described by the show's title. Dorothy Cross constructs familiar gender oppositions using cow's udders. *Cowboy* is a gymn horse covered in hide with a mammary extrusion at the 'head', saddled and ready to be ridden. In two other works, silver dish-covers top stuffed cow's udders in a metaphor where rational art, looking rather tarnished, sits over a fleshy, feminised base. These works are witty and complex conceits but make conventional points.

Nicole Eisenman appears far more straightforward in her condemnation of patriarchy. *Minotaur*, a large scale mural parodies mythological painting, and the star macho creator, Picasso. Naked maenads mutilate minotaurs who are bled to yield a perfume for sale - a reference to Paloma Picasso who trades on her name. On the face of it, the sentiments expressed are highly dubious: violent sacrifices are flatly represented in scenes where, as Cherry Smyth puts it, everything 'is gloriously healthy, abandoned and efficient',¹ as if evoking some matriarchal fascism. Yet the scene is plainly staged in front of a backdrop, one of the maenads takes pictures of the proceedings, and the central minotaur, like Christ, is pierced in the side by a spear. All these factors lead the viewer to question the depicted acts of violence. As pure PC revenge it is very peculiar because of the marketing activities of its female protagonists: the

¹*Bad Girls*, ICA, London 1993, essays by Cherry Smyth and Laura Cottingham.

final effect is to parody feminism as much as its ostensible targets. In any case, it fails, for parody needs to approach the standards of its target, and this work doesn't even come close.

Sue Williams makes comic-book paintings, in which extremely bad line drawings and incoherent slogans cover a light surface. An example from *Victim Ranting*: 'Thats no victim/ Thats a contemporary women/ Who does not wish to see/ Women portrayed as victims/ So rape + beat someone else'. Reviewers in the States have found this work funny or raw, but it is really neither. The mistakes, incoherencies and the humour which invariably misses its mark are all part of a highly calculated stupidity. The paintings systematically rehearse the major themes of Western feminism: rape, child abuse by men, giving birth, women as victims, male power in the art world. Their calculated derangement and incoherence comment on some women's positioning of themselves as infantilised victims. Williams could be praised for making art which deals with real issues, if the whole exercise was not so cynical; there is no route out of the crude nightmare in which she places us, because (depending on our sex) we are all too dumb, too violent, or too implicated in violence.

In complete contrast, Rachel Evans makes pretty but bland large-scale pencil drawings, which appear to be parodies of true romance picture stories. In each there is a flowery inscription ('Robinson and I at the beach on the island of despair') which identifies one figure as a famous person. Placed in some rural idyll, the pair grin inanely at one another. Evans' intention was to fall marginally short of making good drawing, and this is just what she has done. The heroes are of dubious merit - whether it be Robinson Crusoe (the archetypal bourgeois hero), Joan of Arc or Jesus. A parody of conventional romance and depiction is cleverly linked with memories of childhood idols.



The most interesting and affecting work in *Bad Girls* is by Nan Goldin who makes high colour, high resolution prints of her acquaintances. The work is present here because of the deadpan display of gender switching among transsexuals, but the feeling here is above all of a poetry of the mundane, and the strength of the work is to show the things which a great variety of people have in common. The subjects are often seen at rest among all kinds of personal possessions and detritus, displaying themselves and evoking ennui. The evident co-operation of most of Goldin's subjects was crucial to the sympathetic portrayal of private moments. The intimacy of her subjects is set off against the scale, quality and presentation of the pictures which are sometimes grouped as diptychs or triptychs. The awkward realism of these works has been forever altered by the AIDS epidemic which has produced in the deathly aspect that photographs usually have, an added charge. Once seen as slide shows in clubs, surrounded by incident, music, and no doubt some of the people represented, these pictures now appear mounted in the gallery, as high art tombstones. The ordinary life of their subjects is tragically recast as a fixed heroism.



That Helen Chadwick is the only artist represented in both exhibitions suggests something of the links between them. As usual her work undermines gender distinctions and corporeal boundaries. *Self Portrait*, in an amusing play on identity, shows a human brain cupped in two hands. It is a backlit cibachrome transparency, attached to its backing with large brass screws and washers, like a cross between a bathroom mirror and the photographs in a fast food joint. Frankenstein is implicit here and in *Elective Affinities* with Jana Sterbak's crudely modelled body parts,

the components of a golem, and with a bronze head wired into an electrical socket. In Chadwick's *Glossolalia* fox pelts on a circular dais surround a central bronze erection cast from lamb's tongues. The column is hollow so the expected transfer of gender attributes takes place. The animals' snouts touch its base. 'Glossolalia' means the gift of speaking with tongues, but here the tongues are fixed forever in bronze, and of course the work stands as a Tower of Babel, and is thus a deeply cynical comment about communication. In *Elective Affinities* Chadwick shows *Piss Flowers*, white enamelled sculptures cast from holes made in the snow by the urine of the artist and her 'partner'. Each is crudely flower shaped with an outer ring of stalactites skirt the petals - the male's performance. Chadwick herself athletically deposited her urine dead centre typically forming a phallic structure, so again the gender interchange is achieved. Despite their toilet bowl surfaces, these sculptures are impressively complex, but much of the point is surely the by now well-worn opposition between high art and low life.

Elective Affinities is the title of a novel by Goethe, itself taken from a theory of chemical attraction, in which compounds are formed when particles appear to act with volition. Goethe's point was that in people, too, will may be merely illusory. New developments and analogies are currently bringing this issue back to prominence: controversial genetic predispositions towards homosexuality and schizophrenia have been posited; chaos theory shows that highly complex phenomena may be caused by a few very simple forces; robots governed by a very few tropisms display apparently volitional, animal-like behaviour. In her catalogue essay Penelope Curtis claims that the exhibition should not encourage alienation or distanced appraisal but identification, the return 'to a more primal level of physical being'.² Now this is a little curious because, as expected in an exhibition devoted to photographic representations of the body, the catalogue also contains an essay (by Brian Grosskurth) rehearsing the usual theoretical clichés derived from Bataille and Lacan. While the effect of Lacanian theory is often essentialist and leads to an oscillation between polarised alternatives, it is based on a questioning of the culturally (not naturally) constructed integrity of identity.

²*Elective Affinities*, edited by Penelope Curtis, Tate Gallery Publications, London 1993.

Many of the images shown try to put flesh on the bones of Bataille and Lacan's theories. The works are often literally visceral. In her video *K*, Jayne Parker displays innards in front of her naked frame. A series of stills includes guts in water, and offal on a plastic sheet. In a group of large photographs called *Sculptural*, Hannah Villiger shoots her own body by holding the camera at arm's length. The resulting fragmentary body parts are sometimes read as deformities or cannot be identified. The apparently strange articulations of joints and juxtapositions of limbs is reminiscent of Bellmer. The peculiar orientation of the shots are a literal illustration of Bataille's questioning of bodily hierarchies. Bleached, blotchy and hairy flesh is present merely as material. Similarly, Thomas Florschuetz shows large colour photographs in heightened, non-naturalistic colour of small fragments of the body greatly enlarged, again producing confusion over identification and depending for their effect on the presence of flesh.

In *Sounding the Depths*, Pauline Cummins and Louise Walsh have created an installation of photographs, video and separate soundtrack within a series of darkened spaces. Video and photographs share the same motifs; the most insistent one is the superimposition of an opening and closing mouth over a naked female torso. The effect is red and fleshy as the moist texture of the internal body is mapped over the skin; the inside of the mouth is transformed into guts, pubic hair becomes a beard, the body becomes a cavity. The mouth opens, sometimes gasping, sometimes in grief, and is intercut with wringing hands, and a cockle shell opening and closing. The prints are narrowly spotlit, standing out dramatically against black backgrounds, and sinister laughter can be occasionally heard as they are viewed. The images are arresting, despite the clichéd inclusion of the shell, yet this is supposedly about the bursting forth from the guts of a specifically female speech, which has been silenced in the past. So it seems strange that the mouth says nothing, and that the viewer is once again thrown back on the materiality of flesh.

A review like this cannot do justice to the complexities of each individual artist's project, but has to view them collectively as exhibited. The two shows have distinct differences: *Elective Affinities* is by far the better organised, argued and presented, and it identifies a definite trend in contemporary representations of the body. Both however explore the common oppositions between inside and outside, male and female, attraction and repulsion, high and low. Both look to biology or psychology to carry them beyond problems of ideology and representation. The preface to the *Bad Girls* catalogue claims that the work offends both patriarchy and prescriptive feminism in an unmediated

enjoyment of material. *Elective Affinities* presents the body without context, an idealism in reverse where people are mere animals, living in a state of nature. This is just as silly as saying that everything is culturally determined, and it opens the way for the rule of a powerless indeterminacy. *Bad Girls* takes on feminist concerns with the representation of the female body and the position of the viewer which have been explored since the sixties. This necessary process has often implied a decentering of the subject, itself part of a broader movement in which what were once peculiarities of metropolitan modernism (shifting identities, dislocation, alienation) were adopted as a conventional marketing device. *Bad Girls*, far from reacting against 'didactic feminism', is complicit in this process, and as a consequence parodies feminism's legitimate concerns. A supposedly 'bad', threatening marginality bleeds into the mainstream as a market brand (complete with poster and T-shirt), in the standard defence of the system: to make entertainment out of its anxieties. Cynicism and dejection are expressed through parody, and this parody, far from being threatening, is effortlessly assimilated, since it greases the passage of ideology, suspension of belief being too much to expect. Similarly, in *Elective Affinities* a specifically cultural dislocation is presented as a set of natural, corporeal effects. A positive cultural position has to be presented, however difficult, not as a matter of nature but of choice.

Bad Girls is at the Institute of Contemporary Arts until 5th December and will be shown at C.C.A., Glasgow from 29th January until 12th March 1994. *Elective Affinities* was shown at the Tate, Liverpool from 8th September to 7th November.