

Print Article



Julie Heffernan
Self Portrait as Post Script
 2007
 P.P.O.W



Julie Heffernan
Self Portrait as Not Dead Yet
 2007
 P.P.O.W



Julie Heffernan
Self Portrait as Spill
 2007
 P.P.O.W

ALL THIS USELESS BOOTY

by Ben Davis

Julie Heffernan, "Booty," Sept. 20-Oct. 20, 2007, at P.P.O.W., 555 West 25th Street, New York, N.Y. 10001

Julie Heffernan's exhibition of 10 new paintings at P.P.O.W gallery in Chelsea has, on the surface, all the signatures of continuing triumph. In numerous previous shows at this gallery and elsewhere, the Yale-trained painter (b. 1956) has developed her own brand of the postmodern baroque mined by John Currin, Kehinde Wiley and Lisa Yuskavage. She continues to refine and integrate her storehouse of effects -- and her new paintings at P.P.O.W are already sold out, the large canvasses going for more than \$60,000 a pop.

The show is titled "Booty," all double meanings intended. Heffernan's paintings consistently focus on the same thing: a full-length female nude at the center -- always the same pale, red-haired figure, a self-portrait of Heffernan herself -- draped by elaborate costumes formed of piles of fruit, flowers, birds and other refugees from classical still-lives.

In *Self Portrait as Post Script* (2007), for instance, the woman stands, bare-breasted, in an ensemble that resembles the immense hooped skirts of Velazquez's royal courts. It is composed of a variety of peacock feathers, flowers, fowl, dead deer and squid, each grouped together to stand in for the different layers of the skirts. The woman's hair is formed of an off-center array of blooming roses, a few garlands snaking chaotically out of the picture.

In *Self Portrait as Spill*, the figure is much the same, only the mound that forms her skirt now consists of fruit as well as deer and fowl, and her hair is a spiraling tower of fruit that ascends to the top edge of the canvas. In *Self Portrait with Men in Hats*, the woman's hair is spun into a web of geometric golden braids, while the skirts are of roses, peacock feathers and rabbits.

Heffernan's paintings are often referred to as "allegorical," because their wealth of cryptic details seems to gesture towards some kind of buried narrative. *Self Portrait as What Holds Up* -- the lone painting here to offer a variation on Heffernan's central image -- presents the painter as a little girl, in a tangled forest, holding up a giant sphere formed of flowers, vines and medallions with cryptic devices on them, suggesting something about the burden of art history on growth in the present.

Self Portrait as Raising Cain adds a number of elements to Heffernan's figure-draped-in-things motif (the things this time are game, flowing silk and pearl necklaces): she holds the legs of a rabbit at waist level, phallus-like; the background is formed of a looming, ghost-like image of a regal woman in pearls; and the surface of the image is flecked with tiny dots of color that, on inspection, are disembodied, spectral body parts -- rotting teeth, skeleton fingers, etc. A statement about the vanity (pearls) of repeating art past (the large portrait) out of context (the floating body parts)?



Julie Heffernan
Self Portrait with Men in Hats
 2007
 P.P.O.W

In the show's two most complex compositions, the backgrounds seem to contain whole alternate universes. The figure in *Men in Hats* is set against a hazy image of larger-than-life male figures battling on horseback, along with a series of spinning, floating medallions, each one featuring the face of a historical ruler or a contemporary conservative political figure in a goofy hat (George W. Bush wears a flamboyant crown; Condoleezza Rice sports a showgirl-style headdress). Meanwhile, in *Self Portrait as Booty*, the green background is broken by pools of imagery, showing tiny, pastoral scenes symbolizing the triumph of unreason -- a group of male hunters shooting each other in a circle, a dog barking at a giant wave, anthropomorphic animals in suits playing croquet, and so on.

It is a feat, indeed, to marshal all this together, into calmly surreal, concentrated images. Heffernan's work has triumphant painterly passages, channeling Dürer in the female anatomy and Chardin in the heaps of dead bunnies, while the fashion design is by way of Arcimboldo, and the landscaping by Dalí. And yet there is a core of melancholy that runs below all the watch-me-paint bravado.



Julie Heffernan
Self Portrait as What Holds Up
 2007
 P.P.O.W

To be sure, on the surface, it is very difficult to locate any sort of feeling at all. Heffernan's paintings are, in fact, distinguished by their emotionally evacuated character, incarnate in the genteel expression on the face of her central figure, which confronts the viewer with classical neutrality every time. A narcotic sense suffuses Heffernan's fantasy scenes, with their heaped up, painterly baggage; they breathe the inertia of overload.

Heffernan herself gives us the key to her paintings by titling them "Self Portrait," over and over, reiterating her own image in each scene as if waving a signal flag. The works are about the narcissism of painting and painterliness. Thus, the objects glutting the canvas are conjured with evident skill -- but the pride in the work is undercut by the frivolity and incoherence of the whole. Heffernan's objects repeat in ensembles, one painterly deer carcass piling atop the next, reiterating the ability to paint, as if to mock the "embarrassment of riches" of an artistic skill that is formidable, but finds its subject mainly in replaying past styles.



Julie Heffernan
Self Portrait as Raising Cain
 2007
 P.P.O.W

The pleasure of pastiche is the pleasure of recognizing that one is smart enough to recognize something as pastiche, narcissistically. Heffernan scrambles this enjoyment by exaggerating it, strobing freely from one reference to the next, multiplying them ostentatiously into a chaotic thicket that never resolves into any specific quotation you can easily identify. The knowledge of painting past Heffernan displays is deliberately hypertrophied, overgrown, distorted.

It is baffling to hear traditionalist critics like David Cohen praise Heffernan's pomo wall candy, saying that her "use of old painterly languages is less tongue-in-cheek than hand-on-heart -- a means of accessing a dreamlike space of high imagination." The paintings at P.P.O.W are clearly not about taking off into fantasy-land but about being weighed down by and mired in *stuff* -- old painterly languages included; in painting after painting, the artist depicts herself as stuck in the same place, mired in her own phantasmagoric environments. In the background details of *Booty*, *Men in Hats*, *Raising Cain* and *What Holds Up*, one finds buried the words "Help," "Oh No," and "S.O.S.," repeatedly -- cartoon exclamations of being trapped.

In his *New York Sun* review of this show, Cohen distinguishes Heffernan from fellow oil-on-canvas bricoleurs like John Currin by saying that her quotations are "not supporting effects to an a priori imagery, but are rather integral to the value and meaning of her work." Then he is unable to say what this meaning might actually be, besides having a command of technique and doing pretty things with



Julie Heffernan
Self Portrait as Booty
 2007
 P.P.O.W



Julie Heffernan
Self Portrait as Booty (detail)
 2007
 P.P.O.W



Julie Heffernan
Self Portrait as Spill (detail)
 2007
 P.P.O.W



Julie Heffernan
Self Portrait with Men in Hats (detail)
 2007
 P.P.O.W

history. But the virtue of Heffernan's painting is precisely that it deconstructs this kind of cartoonish investment in technique.

One point of reference for Heffernan is John Currin, it is true, an artist whose painterly "skill" has become a critical cliché. But the other obvious reference for Heffernan's art-historical self-portraiture is Cindy Sherman. Before she became inescapable as an influence, Sherman was initially denounced by her peers precisely for her lack of "skill" (for this reason it was the department of sculpture at MoMA that first acquired her work, not the department of photography). The exaggerated respect for abstract artistic technique that Currin consecrated in the '90s was the dialectical underside of this deskilling, and was inflected with a corresponding exaggerated edge even as it shared the same language of quotation. Heffernan's mock self-aggrandizement reflects a keen awareness of this.

And here, finally, is where the melancholy comes in, the authentic heartbeat beneath the hollowed out triumphs of Heffernan's large canvasses. Some have suggested that the kinship between Heffernan and Sherman makes Heffernan's practice "feminist." Sadly, the issues faced by women today have little to do with being compared to Baroque paintings. And in fact, Heffernan is explicitly absorbed with depicting a consciousness locked up in a web of art references and virtuoso technique that touches on nothing real, addresses itself to only shadow referents, and is thus unable to engage with its own moment. George W. Bush appears, but only as a caricature in the crowd of historical noise.

Insomuch as they render something topical, Heffernan's anti-history paintings depict contemporary art circling in its own mental cage, at a loss to grapple with the present in a vital way. And insofar as they are fully "allegorical," they are illustrations of the old phrase, "those who do not know the past are doomed to repeat it," only altered: "those who do not engage with the present are doomed to repeat the past."

BEN DAVIS is associate editor of *Artnet Magazine*.



Julie Heffernan
Self Portrait as Booty (detail)
2007
P.P.O.W



Julie Heffernan
Self Portrait as What Holds Up (detail)
2007
P.P.O.W



Julie Heffernan
Self Portrait with Men in Hats (detail)
2007
P.P.O.W