

# WOMEN UNDER THE INFLUENCE

by Michelle Weinberg

This second annual exhibition at Girls' Club developed in a completely organic way. Looking at the works in the collection of Francie Bishop Good and David Horvitz is like browsing a cross-section of the communal efforts of female contemporary artists over the last forty years. Several strands appeared, connecting the works. One is the pleasurable exercise of abstract painting. Another is narratives using homely, folkloric or illustrational styles. A third is a passion for traditional craft media. A fourth is photographic works that innovate in hi- and lo-tech ways, elucidating a transition from photography to digital media. Under the Influence is a compendium of these four basic strategies, and the individual works offer many digressions from the path. If one were to conceive of the exhibition as a chart, imagine a genealogical tree with many branches and hybrid crossings to map all the connections and coincidences. Or perhaps a diner placemat directing a visitor to local sites of interest throughout a region.

From the beginning, the discussion among the organizers of this exhibition - myself, Francie Bishop Good and Jane Hart - centered on the social networks that inform our lives. Women are notoriously social, raised with the expectation of support and validation that comes through friendship and shared experiences. I was reminded of a classic television commercial (link below) aimed at just this sort of feminine system of communication. Implanted permanently in my image bank by Madison Avenue, it seemed apropos.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TgDxWNV4wWY>

Some of the works in Under the Influence share aesthetic vocabularies as a result of artists working in proximity to one another. Amy Sillman relates to Suzanne McClelland who relates to Elisabeth Condon to Joanne Greenbaum to Lisa Sanditz, all New York painters. This is one lateral circle of influence among women producing art currently. Each of these artists has achieved mastery of their respective paint languages, by incorporating drawing in distinctive ways.

Other influences reach through time, linking one era and its artists with another. Elaine Reichek invaded the austerity and epistemological obsessions of the conceptual art movement in the 1980s using humble craft media - knitting and embroidery. It is impossible to imagine that the resurgence and acceptance of craft materials and processes twenty years later could have occurred without this pioneering first instance that spoke with a woman's voice and hand. Frances Trombly's hand-woven, cross-stitched and embroidered works are free to engage in the aesthetic speculation of 2008 without first having to defend its right to be. Similarly, Nancy Spero's vast opuses, made with hand-printed and collaged figures on paper that confronted ugly truths about oppression of women and war-mongering throughout history paved the way for Kara Walker's scenarios of cut paper imagining the grotesqueries of slavery and its aftermath.

In Under the Influence, female artists irreverently tinker with the canons of modernist and post-modernist art. The grid, the color field, the pristine photographic image, the free-standing sculpture releasing a form carved from a continuous solid, these are replaced by idiosyncratic strategies, often embracing non-art materials and ideas. Louise Lawler's Big seemed to exemplify the ultimate in meta-art, capturing in her viewfinder the contemporary work of art in its unassembled, back room state, unassisted by its gallery context. The decapitated head of Picasso, the ultimate modernist paterfamilias, the decapitated work of Maurizio Cattelan, a present-day contemporary art wunderkind, the spectators in Thomas Struth's photo in the background themselves contemplating the ruined marble heroes of an ancient era - all are laid bare, caught in the dressing room, backstage in the storage facility of the contemporary auction house or art fair.

Embracing abject or discarded objects and lovingly restoring them - these acts are performed by many artists in Under the Influence. Tara Donovan recycles disposable, quotidian objects - plastic straws, drinking cups, pencils, to create landscapes of the discarded. Amy Mahnick creates miniature sculptures out of dolled-up kitchen refuse and paints them in miniature, with a tenderness that evokes Morandi. Ann Hamilton's oeuvre is about the marvelous, the ineffable, the precious, borne of the repetitive drudgery of domestic tasks, performed by faceless drones. The failure, the inability to conform, the fearless embrace of the unstable material or structure, the willingness to persevere without the benefit of establishment approval or validation, these are all in evidence in works by women in Under the Influence. Pipilotti Rist's video, Entlastungen, is a catalog of video's technical "failures", the glitches and swarms of static impeding a woman's ability to even stand up (achieve erection?). Celebratory, even as they acknowledge their awkwardness or outsider nature, Amy Sillman's Ugly and Suzanne McClelland's Bitch, here teamed up in an irresistible partnership, proudly announce their pejorative labels, their failure to constitute "beauty" in a traditional sense. Anti-heroic, both artists temper the raw power of abstract expressionist paint handling with loopy handwriting and doodling to create distinctive vocabularies. E.V. Day's mummified Barbies are as hilarious as they are ingenious, embalming that Beauty Queen in beeswax, only her blue eyes blankly twinkling. Petah Coyne's hobby shop birds are sculptural on par with the Barbies - pop cultural icons, readymade, familiar to the consumer. Craft mediums and techniques are freely explored in Under the Influence. Wangechi Mutu's bookmaking, Alison Elizabeth Taylor's work in wood veneers and marquetry, Kerry Phillips' assemblage of carpet remnants.

A commitment to the raw, the unfiltered, the analog is also evident here. From Ann Hamilton's video, referred to as Honey Pocket, which was shot on a Pixel Vision camera made by Fisher-Price for children's use, to Kevin Arrow's recycled vintage

slides played on their own vintage projector to Cindy Bernard's video of an 8-track player, these works speak to the artists' affection for nuanced texture, timbre, depth, dimension, resonance, features sometimes missing from the smooth surface of digital production. The photographers Andrea Modica, Courtney Johnson, Abelardo Morell and Vera Lutter use pinhole photography, camera obscura, platinum palladium prints, all photographic processes that suggest that the current moment is not dominated by the digital image. By refusing to slavishly adhere to the next new technological advance, these artists assert their freedom to move back and forth between old and new media. This flexibility bodes well for art, invites us to open our eyes to subtle or handmade techniques, to slow down our attention spans.

A fictionalized, stylized apprehension of nature - the magic garden - is a recurring theme in this exhibition. A suggestible, porous relation among female and animal forms is present in Rakel Bernie's work. Gregory Crewdson's photographs distill a moment in which the comfortable balance we expect between insects, birds, humans, and inside/outside are threatened. Claire Garrett's over-sized "Departure", constructed of ficus reeds, looms over the space at Girls' Club, a symbol of the potency of the nest, the ultimate female creative space. Madeline Denaro's hive-like, beeswax-doused pendant sculpture echoes the hive-like office space of Girls' Club itself, a sculptural feature of the interior design by Margi Nothard.

Repetition and rhythmic motion that elicits a narcotic or ecstatic response is another take on the title Under the Influence. Many of the video works fall into this category. Ann Hamilton's video of her hand repeatedly squishing honey in her pocket until it soaks and stains her pants is blatantly masturbatory. Jen Stark's Streaming Gradient and Jennifer Steinkamp's Dance Hall Girl use regular repetitive rhythm, like chanting, to open up channels of consciousness that may not be available in an awake state. Lynne Gelfman's fields of repeated marks evoke the white noise of television static. Tara Donovan's superabundance of marks snares the viewer's sub-conscious awareness and envelops us in a vibrating field.

Under the Influence explores the phenomenon of artists shapeshifting, stepping outside the studio to curate, write, deal, collect, consult, produce, and publish. Works from the collections of each curator - and works by each curator - are included, reflecting our own obsessions as well as the openness of Girls' Club as an exhibition project. Devon Dikeou's publication, Zing, is aptly subtitled "a curatorial crossing", for the collaboration and cross-pollination it features in its pages. Pae White's Oblique Strategies is a card game, and as such, is completed only when the participant collaborates.

#### Art Lib

Overall, the organizers of Under the Influence aim for a healthy loosening up of the hegemony of relationships existing in the art world today, so that art and artists can experience greater freedom. The alpha male star artist, the patriarchal art dealer, the heavily invested critic, can all yield in favor of a looser system with all manner of agents and marketplaces, self-distribution, creative writing on art, in short, any practical platform that enables art to flourish.