

Conversation with Julie Heffernan

Joel Silverstein

After a dual show at Littlejohn and P.P.O.W., Julie Heffernan has emerged as one of the most compelling figurative artists of her generation. Deriving from the 80's techniques of appropriation and layering, Heffernan has evolved a complex meta-narrative that is both a general feminist critique of the nude and a very specific psychoanalytic confessional. Purposefully cultivating an old master's look, her work retains its contemporary edge, balancing seduction with irony.

Joel Silverstein: One of the many bifurcations in history is how men see women as opposed to how women see women. That seems to be the initial topic in viewing your work.

Julie Heffernan: Sure. It's not necessarily one that I first consider when I'm painting, but Ken Johnson (in his review of the last show) wondered if feminists would object to these depictions involving a certain kind of conventional beauty. I'm not interested in the kind of showy glamour that people justify under the aegis of Third Wave Feminism; see through miniskirts and the like. I do believe you can paint beautiful women if you show how real beauty is a complicated issue, not just about pretty faces. Think of how powerful the nudes of Titian and Rubens are. *Take the Abduction of the Daughters of Leucippus*: (Pinakothek, Munich 1618). There's nothing in the nudity of those women that undermines the position of women. You could be troubled by it because the man is clothed and the women are naked (and obviously because it's a depiction of a rape) but the women are fighting, vulnerable, ethereal and earthy all at the same time. It's no simple matter. There's nothing about those women that makes them look like victims of anything.

JS: They look like they could kick the men's asses (laughter)

JH: Yeah, exactly. The men are definitely secondary characters. They look rather wary, like they know who they're messing with. Rubens puts them in the background to deliberately show off the women's nudity as a testament to their ultimate power. So I believe in beautiful nudes, as long as they're used to evoke something more than just body fixation.

JS: Is this where your particular concept of the nude came from?

JH: The painting that was the bridge between my early and most recent work happened kind of fortuitously, after of all things, an ectopic pregnancy. I was having all these strange pains in my lower back and assumed I was miscarrying. I never heard of any of this and it all happened so fast, there wasn't a lot of time to worry about the situation. Before modern medicine, ectopics were terminal. Later I realized after looking at my scar, that I'd just experienced what, historically, women of child-bearing age always had to contend with as a matter of course: the relationship between childbirth and death.

I call it fortuitous because it gave me the frame work needed for painting the nude. I began calling my early still lifes with pictorial overlays "Self-Portraits" because I've always been interested in work that looks hard at human nature. (The next step was using the nude). Nudes have always been great for "laying bare" whatever situation you might be examining or desiring to paint. But, there seems to be certain subjects in art that have become exhausted by overuse and the nude is definitely one of them, so I couldn't paint one until this "traumatic event" happened. I used myself as a way of getting at this idea.

Here, with a bandage on her abdomen, the female nude was no longer about women objectified, but suddenly described the relationship to potential mortality through childbirth. This was the idea behind Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Certainly women don't have to worry about this so much anymore, but a mere 100 years ago they did.

JS: Is the idea of the unconscious at all important to you?

JH: Yes, certainly, it has always been, but I needed to learn how to use it. That happened by chance. I was living in Berlin in 1987 and making big expressionist paintings, trying to learn how to throw the paint around. I would invariably get to a point where I wouldn't know what to do with the



Julie Heffernan, *Self Portrait as Twins in Limbo*, 2001, oil on canvas, 67 1/2 x 70". Courtesy Littlejohn Contemporary

painting, and I'd become drowsy. What became much more interesting than the paintings was the flood of images that I'd see in my mind's eye just before falling asleep. These pictures seemed much stranger and more interesting than anything that I consciously imagined at the time.

JS: The internal projector?

JH: Right. Which someone recently told me is called image streaming. I'd never heard the term before, but it became hugely important for my work. I was getting to the point where everything was becoming a strain, but as I got better at image streaming, I finally felt like I'd tapped into my real source of creativity. These images are a breed unto themselves; not fantasies, or dreams, or daydreams, but like someone else's movie that you happen to be watching. I really don't know what these pictures have to do with my own psychology, but it's fun to watch them roll.

JS: Critics have likened your paintings to Dutch and Spanish still life, but I see 18th century French painting: Fragonard, Watteau, Boucher.

JH: Watteau and Fragonard were artists I loved as a kid, then hated when I thought I know something about art, and now love again. All the sweetness on the surface seemed schmaltzy before I understood how truly weird they are. They seem the opposite of Velazquez; masculine vs. feminine, but two sides of the same coin to me. There's this wonderful Fragonard in the Met. Two little girls brushing their bouffant hair. But their faces are incredibly distorted and scary. Seemingly sweet little French girls who are really monsters.

JS: So there's an underside to those guys. They're not just purveyors of sweet schlock.

JH: I'm attracted to those kind of worlds. Thomas Cole gets it. He gets that kind of slightly melodramatic world where he's dealing with a psychological space that feels seductive, or Baroque in the sense of a space that you enter into. A slippery encompassing space, that's what I've been after.

JS: What's your relationship to history? Do you feel part of it's continuum or part of it's break?

JH: I really think it's an ongoing conversation across time and there are artists you want to talk to, who talk back to you, as opposed to those who don't. I remember looking at this Kenneth Noland painting of a target that was very flat and seemed taunting in its emptiness. I had just been looking at a Tiepolo painting with one of those wide open Baroque sky-spaces where I'd been floating around. So when I came to the Noland painting I felt like the door had been slammed shut against me. They were similar forms, the target and the ceiling in the sense of beckoning you towards a center, but the Noland kept you at a distance. It wouldn't let you in. I remember saying in my mind, "Well, Fuck You Too!" (in my male voice). I was an undergrad in the 70's and the only kind of painting that was taken seriously then was Minimalism. I couldn't figure out where I fit in, until I realized it was only a decade long movement after centuries of art made by people who actually thought it was good to have feelings.

This makes me think about the early Greeks' theory of vision which I think is elegant. Their theory, if I understand it, goes like this: vision is actually an effluvium that, when the eyelids open, oozes out from the retina towards the object of vision. The eye has what are called psychopodia, or little fingers, that actually touch the thing being looked at. So there's this direct connection between touch and sight. It makes a lot of sense to me. It's how I would describe the kind of looking that you see in a Picasso or Rembrandt. **Continues on www.nyartsmagazine.com**