



Julie Heffernan, *Self-Portrait as Radiant Host*, 2000.
oil on canvas, 82 × 83"

JULIE HEFFERNAN

P. P. O. W. GALLERY /
LITTLEJOHN
CONTEMPORARY

Julie Heffernan's imagination looks suspiciously like the gift shop at some tourist-thronged beaux arts museum—the Prado, say, or maybe the Frick. Everywhere in her lavishly rhetorical paintings are passages borrowed from Spanish still lifes, Flemish landscapes, English pet portraits, and furtive, nightmarish Goya vignettes. In her foregrounds, pale red-haired figures, all titular self-portraits, flaunt the dark-lipped Hapsburg underbite fixed in our memories by Velázquez (imagine Philip IV played by a naked Tilda Swinton). That underbite, the notorious symptom of royal inbreeding, suggests a comparable aristophilia in

Heffernan: a pampered appetite for canonical art history. She likes the varnished world of the old masters, and she serves it up to us in the form of flamboyant, idiosyncratic pastiche. One can't help thinking that her art springs from a bad, obvious idea—a kind of Grand Tour Surrealism.

The challenge posed by Heffernan's latest pictures is simple: Can we maintain this stern view in light of their stealthy beauty and imaginative assurance? My own (flimsy) disapprobation crumbled after a second walk-through. Of the twenty paintings in these shows, *Self-Portrait as Radiant Host*, 2000, at P.P.O.W. was the most entrancing. The artist appears as a slim nude, clothed in fruits. A ruddy, waist-high heap of apples, pears, plums, grapes, and figs forms a sort of hoop skirt around her. From branches above, garlands of cherries, crab apples, and plums hang down to suggest a theater curtain. In the background, three—no, four; no five!—rivulets switch-back through rocky escarpments to collide in a foaming pool behind her. The setting registers as "nature," but in an entirely artificial, operatic sense. At its center Heffernan herself, raising her arms to fend off further windfalls, is recognizably a harvest goddess, the author of all this gorgeous, ingratiating, improbable abundance.

It's a triumphalist picture, an advertisement for the artist's own ripening imagination. So were its neighbors, with their garden landscapes full of peacocks, volcanoes, and glowing jewelry, their levitating dresses made from roses, animal carcasses, and flaming hoops. Heffernan's prop room is evidently short of modern accoutrements. It's also polemically feminine, or even girlish, suggesting a cross between a

dress-up party, a sweet shop, and a petting zoo. The occasional scene—the artist holding a wriggling alligator, for instance—comes across as tritely fanciful. More often, though, as in *Radiant Host* or its sister painting, *Self-Portrait as Demi-God*, 2000 (at Littlejohn), where the two-headed figure disappears into a tottering column of fruit, a manic plenitude carries us along in its wake.

What's most compelling, and even slightly freakish, about this plenitude is its density and finish. Each of the cascading apples is lustrously tactile. Even the tiniest animals snarl to reveal glittering teeth. And yet the paintings are clearly executed at speed: The touch is rapid and assertive, businesslike rather than caressing. It's obvious that the images, for all their density, are improvisations. For confirmation, one had only to compare the catalogue reproductions to the exhibited paintings. Characteristically, in the days preceding both openings, Heffernan made substantial and intricate revisions to most of the canvases. How many contemporary artists paint with the mnemonic efficiency of Turner on varnishing day?

Heffernan is hardly the only painter working in such a fantasy-fueled, anti-realist mode. But she may be the only one whose iconography is so intricate, reckless, and generous. She offers the spectacle of a whimsical female eye indulging itself, reveling in its own fertility. Her skinny girlish goddesses with their baroque bloodlines may not have the ironic equilibrium of Currin's and Yuskavage's top-heavy heroines. But they're growing up fast, and they already prove that museums are not such a bad place to spend your adolescence.

—Alexi Worth