

ANNETTE BEZOR: PAINTED WOMEN

Ted Snell

Who are these women? They are seductive, assured, beautiful and aloof, but some are demure and introspective. Their lineage is also mixed, not only through race but also artistic heritage. They are the daughters of Parmigianino¹ and Agnolo di Cosimo Bronzino but also Vladimir Tretchikoff and Tamara De Lempicka. Some look more like models from a Mills & Boon cover, though they mimic the pose of a predecessor sitting for Georges de la Tour. Others are straight from the set of a porn movie, though swathed in flowers. What seems so simple, a beautiful girl in a turban, is suddenly more complex, posing a series of questions about how we look, what we see and what shapes our looking?

Annette Bezor explores feminine identity in an age awash with images made instantly contemporary - whether five hundred years old or fifty - by the process of photographic reproduction and digital distribution. They join the images of models, film stars and pop-singers Photoshop-ed into smooth pristine perfection. These women are re-presented as benchmarks of beauty, as targets to emulate. For an artist trained in the hotbed of intellectual ferment that was the women's art movement in Adelaide during the seventies these ideas remain the catalyst for making images that test and tease out assumptions about feminine beauty, about power and control. Bezor borrows their techniques of distortion and inflation to subvert and expose. The large scale of her paintings, the manipulation of the photographs in the computer before their transfer onto canvas, the repetition of key images in numerous paintings in various configurations and colours, force us to see these painted women as sites of contention where notions of gender, ethnicity and sexuality are challenged and questioned.

Where are these women? What space do they inhabit and what brought them there? They may have begun life in Bronzino's studio, represented as a smooth dark-toned envelope of colour, or a garishly lit studio, but now they move languidly through an ethereal space where the sun is perennially setting. This is the idealised world of the photo-shoot and the fashion magazine, where flamboyant turbans, marble complexions and shiny, pursed lips are the norm. It is also the world of the movies, where perfect women blown up on a huge screen dominate and overwhelm, where their sexuality is manifest and their power absolute.

Bezor fabricates this space with a technical repertoire borrowed from the history of art, with the skill of a Mannerist artist and the canny knowingness of a cultural critic. It is a site balanced precariously between art

¹ Mannerist painter Girolamo Francesco Maria Mazzola, 1503-1540, known more commonly as Parmigianino

and popular culture, a place orchestrated by the unheard arpeggios of a string orchestra bringing the whole painting to a crescendo of intensity before the cut to another scene or the fade to black – Prokofiev meets Rogers and Hammerstein. In this space of suspended disbelief we are instantly seduced, but not for long. There are awkward passages that disrupt and shock, like the repeating figure turning in on herself, the disjunctures of scale, the stretched distortions and all these elements are then deployed within the artificial controlling frame of a square or double square. The devices of art are used as signals to warn us about the dangers of accepting too readily and believing all we are offered on the luminous screen or glossy page. By conflating images of women from the history of art with those in the popular media and then re-presenting them as 'high art' she provides the necessary clues to critique and question this process of objectification.

What are these women doing? They are being observed, waiting to be captured by a lens or brush or another. They look familiar because they are, not only from history and magazines but because Bezor repeats them to reinforce their role as stereotype and icon. In painting after painting they reappear in a similar guise but they are not identical so we have to look again to reassure ourselves. Art mimics popular culture and the market economy to reveal its ploys, but unlike the mechanical reproduction of the print or digital domains they are unique and retain an aura of authenticity.

They are also ready for sex or at least ready to fake it. Their turbans position them in the harem, their ethnicity identifies them as the exotic other, their gaze (averted or otherwise) aligns them with the coquette, they are women aware of being observed and they look back seductively or defiantly. Bezor presents a range of possibilities to empower them, to give them choices and at the same time she offers us the same opportunity so we too can question and challenge our assumptions.

Annette Bezor makes powerful paintings that temptingly draw us into their sphere of influence. They are complex, layered images that reveal their sources and influences over time as we move past the rich and alluring surfaces toward an engagement with ideas about art, culture, identity, gender, sexuality and power.

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