

Jo OWENS

Boudoir Babes

Women trapped in colorful armatures of jewels, gems, and cracked glass, paid to be . . . to be quiet. Fetishized, fragmented, fetching, frightened(ful), fancy, familiar, foxy ladies--transfixed for eternity in thick, crystal-clear, super-gloss, non-yellowing, tough, protective glazes of fixative. Acetone, toluene, plaster and plastic surfaces, painstakingly assembled, composed. Stepford wives, teflon ladies; goddess and trollop, voodoo doll and holy relic--garnished in the discarded, tawdry jewelry of other women. Madame Bovary, Boudoir babe. This is the stuff of Jo Owens' powerful and provocative assembly of multi-media sculpture, which opens at the Samuel S. Fleisher 1995-96 Challenge Exhibition on, interestingly enough, Friday, October 13, 1995.

Every inch of the roughly 16 feet square, well-lit room reverberates in Owens' surreal, fairy tale-turned-nightmare vision of luxurious yet deathly femininity caught up in the conflicts of the modern world--a world wherein, Owens laments, two-thirds of the world's "beautiful" women can not read and wherein they are trapped in a web of domestic violence. Jo Owens' art speaks of the feminist paradox of idealized, bejeweled, female beauty and the repression of glorious individual identity. *Sister*, a whimsical piece of plaster-cum-beadwork, presents the conjoined busts of a jovial threesome

lost in a multi-colored limbo of baubles, small toys, feathers, and puckered lips. Tongue in cheek? Giddy gals or Gorgons?

Owens' sexy ladies have a chilling sameness, are mute, wear no watches (made for men, the artist claims) but rather jewels, as they wait for their biological clocks, set to 10, to run out. Cinderellas, all of them, with(out) a prince. Showcased in the exhibition flyer, *Mirror, Mirror on the Walls* a mixed media piece composed of an oval mirror in a frame encrusted with cracker-jack miniature toys--ballerina slippers, birds, hearts with keys, doll dresses, and teddy bears. A beaded female head whose cheeks and eyebrows form a broken heart shape emerges from the mirror's center as if beckoned from behind or beyond by the fairy tale incantation. This is not the assuasive substance of bedtime stories but rather the prolific and haunting fruit of a child-woman.

Mannequins/Mannicons of female vanity which silently mediate art historical themes such as the inevitable passage of time, the idealized female body as the subject of art, the act of looking and of being looked at, the gaze of the artist/viewer, Owens' sculptures are composed, for the most part, of dismembered mannequins, mirrors, mirror frames, and shiny amulets of all sorts.

Her ladies radiate an almost Byzantine zest for nature--frozen, transmuted. Her emphasis on women's lives in joy, transience, and chaos leads her to an overwhelming sense of transcendence and the immutable in these mosaic-like assemblages. Truncated busts, such as *African Beauty*

are de-individualized and stylized, denatured and eternal. Her vision is of a human personality isolated within a world without horizon, incapable of manipulation or movement because the arms and legs have been taken--by society's double standard.

Born in Durham, North Carolina, the sixth of a brood of nine (all of whom shared the initial "J" in their given names) and one woman of six, Owens took her place in the family's middle. Her early life was peripatetic, moving and changing schools every year or two as her father Clifford James Owens (now deceased) travelled in search of a livelihood in sales. Breast cancer stole the adolescent artist's mother, Dorothy Jane, in 1966, and she became co-guardian, along with her sisters, of the younger members of the family.

Almost despite her stolen childhood, the artist displays a fierce sense of optimism, childlike innocence, *joie de vivre* and most of all, a healthy sense of humor in her ladies, her hobby horse (*Equestrienne Dreamer* which must, she indicates in the title, be construed as female!), her photographs and other small ceramic pieces. The artist's interest in photography predates her recent experiments (1994-95) in bijouterie represented at the Fleisher. It stems from a period in the eighties when Owens lived with the homeless in a seedy hotel in Nashville, Tennessee and created a photoessay on indigence.

The artist has a BA in the history of art from Rosemont College, Rosemont, Pennsylvania (1993) where, she claims, her art migrated out of

the photographic realm into an interest in the painting and minor arts of the Middle Ages and Renaissance where she discovered color, iconography, and the harsh historical realization of the sin of Eve. Owens' Collegeville studio is very like the show: crawling with frillery and fripple, dripping with drama, all strung together with a solid chain of good humor and moral intelligence.

She is married to William Murray, a geologist. Her exhibition record boasts many shows in the New York and Philadelphia art world. Owens is First Vice-President of Philadelphia's Tri-State Chapter of Artists Equity. Her show will remain at the Fleisher until November 4, 1995.

Her goal, she says, is the goal of all women: the freedom to be, to be guiltless, happy, whole, to be seen . . . and heard. If Owens' Boudoir Babes could speak, their cries would crack the plastic surface of their world.

by **Tina Waldeier BIZZARRO**

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