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The Thinkers

Figures of Thinking: Convergences in Contemporary Cultures

By Douglas Max Utter

Artistic practice in any period is a throbbing skin of images, ideas, fears and aspirations. The ambitious traveling exhibit “Figures of Thinking: Convergences in Contemporary Cultures” scratches many a contemporary itch, running deft nails over identity, disenfranchisement, and the peripatetic nature of many artists’ lives.

The title is from the writings of Marjorie Garber, the bestselling Harvard professor who stresses the fluidness in all cultural categories. Independent curators Vicky A. Clark and Sandhini Poddar chose fourteen women artists to conduct an open-ended, contemporary conversation about materials and transitions, often colored by feminist concerns and post-colonial conditions.

The most familiar name on the show’s star-studded roster is that of Palestinian-born, London-based artist Mona Hatoum, known since the 1980s for her performances and sculptural installations. A 2002 Hatoum exhibit in London titled *Grater Divide* displayed a room divider-sized version of a cheese grater. The change of scale transforms it into a domestic torture device, evoking unconscious fears of the feminine. The oversized curved apertures in the center panel—designed for slicing vegetables—look like a stack of evil smiles. A 1999 silver gelatin print of graters lined up on a window sill and a 2001 wax paper rubbing of the different surfaces of a grater are on view in “Figures.”

Everywhere in the exhibit body parts strike out on their own, seceding to strange compounds of the self. In Ellen Gallagher’s etchings, cartoon-ish eyes, mouths and hair sampled from racist illustrations behave almost like algae or cells under a microscope, clumping and scattering in random combinations. Nairobi-born, Yale-educated Wangechi Mutu’s wildly, beautifully grotesque mixed-media drawings propose a species of constantly mutating female forms, rushing across a dimension of transparent mylar. Barbara Weissberger’s basically friendly looking watercolor creatures are all fuzzy, amorphous dripping flesh and gaping mouth with serried teeth, while Simone Leigh constructs threatening bombshell-like vases from female breast shapes. Such fetishization is used here not to crank up any engine of desire, but to sketch a playful, mildly depraved topology of protest—protest against visual norms and the expectations they enforce.

Like Zen koans, these works tend to be a slap in the face of consciousness-as-usual. For example, Nina Katchadourian records her interactions with spider webs in several works. In one ten-minute DVD loop the artist uses tweezers to place letters spelling the word GIFT into a web. One by one the resident spider tests them for edibility and impatiently extracts them. Katchadourian may or may not be playing with the ambivalence of this word, which means “poison” in German, but the importance of context in establishing the potential toxicity of an image or its materials is a theme recurring throughout “Figures”; caution is advised. Items from Cheryl Yun’s 2004 *Lingerie/Swimsuit Series* consist of featherweight intimate apparel and handbags constructed of Japanese gampi tissue. On close examination their decorative-seeming patterns prove to be copies of news clippings showing overweight thighs, or close-ups of Botox-injected skin or Prozac pills.

The range of “Figures of Thinking” is wide, stretching to include abstract paintings by Chinese-born New Yorker Heesung Yang. Her *Untitled 2004* acrylic on canvas work consists of a vertical pile of slightly sagging red lines against a cream background. These turn out to be neither drawn nor painted, but cut from the surface of the painting, then glued back on. Yang’s work defies expectations or any single definition, balanced on cusps of touch, performance, depiction, and more. Like the best in contemporary art as sampled at “Figures of Thinking,” its elusiveness floats toward an unfamiliar shore, past the breakers of a new mind.

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