

http://www.londongrip.com/LondonGrip/Art_Daphne_Plessner_Girlie.html

LONDON GRIP

... international cultural commentary and criticism

www.londongrip.com ... art literature science politics sport technology music film theatre dance architecture video anthropology poetry economics psychology acting books ballet photography writing fashion painting psychoanalysis sculpture inventions ecology history biology art galleries museums bands image painting technology playwrights drawing transport sculptors drugs installations plays tourism performance charity education authors orchestras geography design mime journalists explorers ...

November, 2008

PAINTINGS

DAPHNE PLESSNER

Kit Lydd reviews Plessner's combination of text and image. Her paintings are not about the voyeuristic gaze but about the grooming of women as disposable consumers. Beyond the naked toys, the seemingly 'sexy' comic-book decoration, there is social criticism, subtle, sharp and unrelenting.

L O N D O N G R I P
o n l i n e e x h i b i t i o n

GIRLIE PAINTINGS BY DAPHNE PLESSNER

L O N D O N G R I P
i n t e r n a t i o n a l c u l t u r a l m a g a z i n e
c l i c k f o r
H O M E P A G E
S U B S C R I B E
e m a i l
londongrip@mac.com



Girlie

The idea of the 'Girlie' has been present in popular culture since the early part of the 20th century. During the 1940s and '50s the term referred specifically to images of coquettishly posed naked women in pornographic magazines. By contrast, contemporary usage of the term touches on a disturbing trend where increasingly younger girls are groomed by the marketplace as sexually ripe adult women. Being 'girlie' today is to be frivolous, dumb, childish and preoccupied with looking sexually available.

An exhibition of paintings at the Whitecross Gallery (now on until 22 November 2008) called 'Girlie' explores the dichotomy of the presentation of women and girls in the marketplace on the one hand and the 'moral' judgements that are then made in criticism of women's sexuality on the other.

At first glance, the exhibition seems to endorse the standard prejudices and conventional assumptions people have of and about paintings. One could very easily assume that the 'art' is light-hearted and decorative, and the very fact that the pictures are painted by a woman artist, are therefore of little significance in the great cut and thrust of discourse in contemporary culture. The exhibition itself is like a stage setting, reminiscent of a boudoir, spot lit and cozy, safe, 'sexy' and predictable.

But all is not as it seems. The work requires that the viewer spend time scrutinizing the images. These paintings are not about the voyeuristic gaze. Nor are they ranting in-your-face one-shot images. For beneath the playful surface decoration and the seemingly 'sexy' imagery is a current of social criticism that is subtle, sharp and unrelenting. Plessner's handling is both aloof and unnerving as the combination of text and image point up the very real problem that female sexuality is uniquely subject to ethical judgements. For Plessner, this assumption is strikingly perverse.

The exhibition displays three large rectangular images and five sets of three images in oval and circular frames, arranged so as to offer us a pictorial narrative reminiscent of comic book thought bubbles. Plessner folds in references to products that are marketed to young girls, such as cuddly toys and playboy bunnies, and employing a busy palette of candy colours she sets-up the viewer to believe that all is well in the world of girlishness.

Each grouping follows a sub-theme and is titled accordingly. But in general, the central images show a selection of inane slogans found on girls T-shirts, such as 'Eye Candy', 'Fluffy', 'Princess', 'The Best You Will Ever Have' etc. that are juxtaposed with women painted as fairy queens and princesses, reminiscent of Vargas. But not all the women are ideal nubile things. This is not a celebration of Vargas's soft porn after all, nor is it an endorsement of the fantasy idealisations of the feminine marketed at adolescent girls. For example, the painting titled 'Princess' looks more like a pantomime dame. Her body, even though covered with brightly painted happy yellow flowers, shows a woman who is a bottle blonde with a bit too much make-up. Placed next to it is a painting of the word 'Whore'. This binary is repeated throughout the exhibition but with varying degrees of irony. Another image called 'Fluffy' shows a woman and a toy dog licking tongues. Next to it is a small circular image of the Disney dog Pluto shown gazing at the couple, followed by a picture of the word 'Bitch'.

Moving between the images and text, between gazing at the pictures of posed naked women and toys and reading the elaborately painted and derogatory titles, makes us a participant in this pictorial debate. We are at the centre of this narrative and made to witness the hypocritical attitudes toward women. Where we might titter at the 'sexy', cheery, even vacuous subject matter, this is undermined by the brute reality of derision reflected in the coarse language. As viewers, we are caught considering the vicious judgements made of women in colluding with the commonly held prejudices of our time.

On a closer reading of 'Honeysuckle', one soon realises that it is not about the clichés of female sexual empowerment, nor is it an endorsement of fey femininity, but about rape. The point is driven home in the adaptation of the lyrics of a popular song from the 1920s. The words 'You are my honey, honeysuckle, I am your Boom Gang a Bang' twist and wind along the painting, with its background of an Islamic honeycomb pattern, drawing our attention to an arrangement of naked toys in the act of being violated. Equally, the painting titled 'Fuck & Discard', with its blond babe posed in an elaborate picture frame, reminds us that we are on the one hand socially and culturally indulgent of the idea of women as emblems of consumerism, but squeamish about the consequences.

Plessner's subtle handling highlights the underlying conceptual paradoxes and the social consequences of moral judgements upon female sexual behaviour. We are left with the uncomfortable realisation that implicit in our cultural attitudes, female sexuality is first set-up for consumption and then cast down in the use of vulgar language that is commonly taken to be an expression of ethical criticism.

Kit Lydd

Girlie
paintings by Daphne Plessner
For further information about the artist see www.plessner.co.uk