



Julie Heffernan at P.P.O.W

by Steven Vincent

If contemporary art criticism still invented labels for movements, Julie Heffernan's gorgeously executed, old-masterish self-portraits might be part of something called Nee-Decadent Baroque. The obsessions of both the Decadent Style and Baroque art, their fervent blend of Christianity and paganism, and their celebration of fertility, are here revived with a self-conscious artificiality that never quite lapses into surrealism. Heffernan manages to avoid the pitfalls of irony, camp or conservatism in strange, sometimes shocking, but always lucid hosannas to a kind of spiritualized femininity.

In a number of the 11 oils on canvas in this exhibition (all but one 2003), Heffernan continues to depict her naked self staring impassively at the viewer, as a riot of flowers, fruit and other colorful objects surround her hips or spill out of her body. In *Self-Portrait as Stone Woman*, the artist--bearing, as always, the aristocratic pallor of Northern Renaissance portraits--discharges a tutulike profusion of baubles and gems. She stands beneath a milky, translucent shower, & *la Danae*. Elsewhere, heightening the sense of fecundity, Heffernan places her figures in scenes of rampant vegetation--a hothouse jungle (*Self-Portrait as a Rare Breed*) or a dense copse (*Self-Portrait as Tiny Eruption*).

In the language of decadence, unchecked growth leads to the grotesque. In *Self-Portrait as Thing in the Forest III*, the artist creates a two-headed image of herself dressed in a tent-shaped hoop skirt. An oversize salamander creeps about her feet. Fire--in coronas, pillars or volcanic conflagrations--appears often, adding to the feeling of nature about to run amok. In *Self-Portrait in the Bedroom* (2002), a hermaphroditic Heffernan, her head haloed by fire, appears in an interior on a giant bed. In turn, she looms over a miniature landscape nestled in the coverlet.

Heffernan's mastery of 17th-century mannerisms and her taste for inexplicable allegory come to the fore in such works as *Self-Portrait as Wunder Kabinet* and *Everything That Rises*. In the first, aristocratic women in flowing gowns gather in the ballroom of a Versailles-like palace, its walls hung with miniatures of Heffernan's own works. A coruscating stream of gems cascades from an ornate chandelier above, surrounded by birds. In the second, birds flutter around another, rather sensuous-looking, chandelier; flaming filaments swirl between it and the meticulously frescoed, Baroque-style ceiling. In both these highly detailed works, it is as if we are privy to a parallel world, filled with ecstasy and awe, where women's psyches might catch fire at the touch of some alien god.