

Julie Heffernan

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Women Create Art Reflecting Their Lives, Thoughts In Benton Exhibit

By Susan Dunne

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Julie Heffernan's oil on canvas "Self-Portrait as an Unwelcome Guest" takes the form of a lush, elaborate still life, of apples and grapes and other produce against a dark background. Some of the fruits are superimposed with photos showing those pictures in Heffernan's head, snippets of experiences which the viewer is left to interpret. (Courtesy Benton Museum)

For centuries, male artists have created portraits of women, presenting the women as they chose and often using those women to represent concepts that were all about the artist and not about the subject. After a while, women were bound to get tired of that.

An exhibit at the Benton museum at UConn takes on this subject head-on, beginning with the title of the show. "Objectifying Myself" showcases the work of dozens of female artists who have created work that reflected their own lives, their own thoughts, their own self-images. Some of the work takes the form of self-portraits that push the boundaries of self-portraiture. Even if they don't depict the artists accurately, that was a decision the artists made. They are literally objectifying themselves.

"There are no bodies, just objects. These are not traditional self-portraits," said Nancy Stula, director of the Benton, who chose 43 works from the collection of women's art at Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. "These feminist artists are trying to reclaim their bodies from the male gaze."

Artist Julie Heffernan spelled out this philosophy in a 2013 interview. "I wanted to paint the figure but did not want to objectify women. I was addressing that concern during my still life phase; taking my own body out of the painting but calling it a self-portrait anyway, was a way of saying 'I'm not this physical body alone; I'm this cornucopia of experiences, and pictures in my head'."

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Kiki Smith embraces the subject with humor. Her series of four linocuts show arrangements of internal organs — lungs, a heart, kidneys, a stomach, a brain — and is titled "How I Know I'm Here." So does Lien Truong, whose oil-on-panel "Family Sitting #2" shows three suits of clothes sitting in a living room, with no heads, hands or feet.

Elizabeth Shreve hides behind her self-portrait. Her oil on linen "Mexican Cakes" shows an array of pastries, with two eyes, a nose and a mouth peeking through the canvas. A lone hand is raised against the mouth, as if to laugh at her own cheekiness. Shreve's "Fun Slide" more closely to portraiture. A nude woman stands in the midst of an array of cakes, while a carnival takes place below, strewn with cuts of meat and fancy shoes. She writes in an artist statement, "My paintings express a world that possesses me as much as I feel I possess myself."

Julia Jacquette also uses pastries to represent herself, or at least represent her desires. In her enamel-on-wood painting "The Thought Of," Jacquette presents an array of 16 goodies alongside a brief bit of prose — "The thought of pressing against your warm silky skin and feeling the heat of your breath" — leaving one to wonder if she desires food more, or sex.

Ilona Granet's silk screen-on-metal "No Cat Calls," from 1987, predates the contemporary art trend taking men to task for street harassment. Her hot-pink, diamond-shaped road sign shows a woman stopping a car driven by a macho kitty.

Joyce Kozloff's fresco-on-panel "Knowledge #51: The Map of Tenderness, 1678," presents what appears to be an antique map, but with all the geographical features named with emotions: The Sea of Enmity, The Lake of Indifference, etc.

Two pioneers of feminist art, Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro, are represented. Chicago's "central core" (vaginal) iconography is seen on a dinner plate. Schapiro's concept of "femmage" — a combination of Cubism and painting with the traditionally feminine art media of fabric and quilting — is seen in "Renewal," an eclectically patterned gown.

Portia Munson also uses oil on linen depictions of clothing, in her case underwear, as a sort of self-depiction. June Wayne uses a bra, gloves and garters to create a lithograph triptych portrait of her mother.

"South Floral," an abstract black wood construction by Louise Nevelson, is enhanced by wall text that points out the necessity of feminist art. An art critic said of her work in 1941, "We learned the artist is a woman, in time to check our enthusiasm. Had it been otherwise, we might have hailed these sculptural expressions as by surely a great figure among moderns."

OBJECTIFYING MYSELF: WORK BY WOMEN ARTISTS FROM THE PENNSYLVANIA ACADEMY OF FINE ARTS is at The William Benton Museum of Art, 245 Glenbrook Road, on the campus of University of Connecticut in Storrs, until July 30. benton.uconn.edu.