

Julie Heffernan: *Everything that Rises* The Art of the Political Self

written by Rachel S. Rosen



Study for Self Portrait As Goad

"I had a dream when I was a young adolescent," recalls Julie Heffernan, "where I was walking through an Eden-like landscape. I came upon a beautiful tree dripping with extremely ripe peaches. As I bit into the fruit, it became a landscape teeming with thousands of insects." At this, the artist bursts into laughter that makes her eyes sparkle and her fiery hair glitter. In fact, Heffernan revealed she conceptualizes all of her paintings as a kind of still life with projected figures and imagery from her psyche, creating portraits of the subjective self. Heffernan, like John Currin, Mark Ryden, and Timothy Cummings all represent contemporary artists that are reviving figurative painting from modernist disdain. Unique to Julie's work are her reinvention of the self portrait and her stylistic blend of Baroque, Rococo, and 17th century elements which create a psychological rendering of the current political climate.

I met Heffernan during the reception for *Everything that Rises*, her latest San Francisco show at Catharine Clark Gallery (September 7 - October 28, 2006), and we continued our correspondence via email. Asked about her progression

as an artist, Heffernan stated, "I was struggling all through undergraduate at UC Santa Cruz in 1981 and graduate school at Yale in 1985 with how to make the figure relevant to myself and to the contemporary conversation of my generation of artists. All through the sixties and seventies figure painting was moribund unless you were a pop artist or a cartoonist, both categories which I include the best figurative artists of the time like Alice Neel, Malcolm Morley, Joan Brown, David Hockney and the like. Pop is about wry distance and I didn't want that in my work." However, as Heffernan traveled to Germany on a Fulbright in 1986, her conceptions about art began to evolve, especially as she engaged with the disparate styles of East and West Berlin. She recalled that while artists in the East were glorifying the human being by painting in a Socialist Realist style similar to the seductive rendering of the Old Masters, the West was practicing Neo-Expressionism whose primitivism was perfect for imaging the hideousness of the human being.

After the artist struggled with her own echoes of the Western style, which she began to feel were too critical, she stumbled on a mechanism she calls "image streaming" which is an unconscious activity in the brain that occurs just before falling sleep. Julie recalled, "I began to notice this process happening during the year I lived in Berlin, painting like a fiend, and finally having time to notice what interesting, bizarre things were going on in my brain that I'd simply never noticed before. I decided I wanted to find a way to learn more about these images so I stumbled on the still life as a way to sort of project, like a film, these images onto the fruit, as though the fruit were the surface of my brain that I was seeing into. It was very basic and simple but it worked. I started to find my own imagery."



Self Portrait as Dead Meat

When asked about the political themes that have emerged in her latest body of work, the artist passionately referenced fellow artist Vito Acconci, replying that "Artist must scream our politics from the rooftops!" She confided that in America's current political climate she felt compelled to let the news filter into her paintings. Heffernan also admits to eschewing music while painting, preferring the news on NPR instead. The vigilant viewer may notice the artist's political commentary in [Study for Self Portrait As Goad](#) (16" x 15", oil on canvas, 2006), where a scrolling red ribbon that twins around a jewel like cluster of fruit reads "Shock and Awe". The artist as a "goad" or stimulus for political change is a reoccurring theme in Heffernan's newest paintings.

Consider for example the political message woven into *Self Portrait as Waterers* (70" x 67", oil on canvas, 2006). The artist begins with her division into twin prepubescent selves, and water out of the figures' fingers, symbolic of sexual creativity among other things, magically flows into a dark pool. Heffernan commented that "I wanted to paint *Waterers* to play with a more blatantly violent background scene, juxtaposed with a greater tangle of beads in the girls' space, as the metaphorical equivalent for the seductive tangle we're in politically." The artist's sentiment certainly comes through in this work. For example, to the right of the *Waterers* a mouse bites a lizard who, in turn, devours a dragonfly. To the left are a line of placards, one of which portrays Disney's iconic Pinocchio with a growing nose; on the other is text that reads "Stop Bush." Taken together, the placards seem to suggest the need to halt a lying administration, the animals might symbolize the chaotic and destructive cycle of aggression. Both elements lead the eye to the midground teeming with tiny battling figures dressed in business suits and cowboy outfits. Their inconspicuous and comical belligerence is dwarfed by an idyllic tropical landscape

painted in the greens, pinks, and brilliant oranges of sunset, studded with autumnal fruit so ripe it looks ready to fall. The painting's profusion of detail, lush flora, and comical soldiers call to mind the apocalyptic vision in *The Garden of Earthly Delights* by Hieronymus Bosch. Additionally it is interesting to contrast the calm of the foreground with the chaos of the midground, and parallels may be drawn to the peaceful climate of the United States while wars are conducted on foreign soil.

Similar themes also occur in [*Self Portrait as Dead Meat*](#) (68" x 57", oil on canvas, 2006). Once again the viewer notices twin-like Roman soldiers on either side of the canvas. The soldiers are poised to shoot a bough of fruit, on whose tangled branches hang dead game such as hares, a chicken, and a white dove. The dead meat and fruit represent the artist's "self", and stem from the Dutch Vanitas tradition where objects symbolize the vanity of worldly things and the brevity of life. In the background clashing Roman armies are comically rendered, and are foregrounded by soldiers with modern apparel and guns pursuing caricatured "Indians".

RSR: If you would, please talk a bit about the Roman Soldier motif that emerges in your latest body of work. These figures, sometimes coupled with more modern soldiers, seem to indicate a political commentary on the United States, perhaps the symbolic successor of imperialist Rome. This symbolism seems especially prominent in works like *Self Portrait as Dead Meat*, where twin Roman soldiers and a pair of lions seem to signify a permutation of the violent Romulus and Remus myth. There is something almost comical, or caricatured about the soldiers- am I right?



Self Portrait as Tender Mercenary

JH: Well said! That's exactly what I'm after, the ridiculousness of the situation we're presently in, if it were not so dire. Men perpetrating the same mistakes in the name of some glorious ideology that is really just a cover for a primitive urge to dominate. The costumes are about preening and trying to look bigger than you are, just like all the birds and beasts have since time began.

In addition to critiquing military aggression, Heffernan weaves into her political narratives ideas about women's sexuality. The "finale" of the artist's current show is [*Self Portrait As Tender Mercenary*](#) (91" x 68", oil on canvas, 2006). References to violence and war are abundant; pairs of Roman soldiers painted in dark blue hues are patterned into the blue background like wallpaper designs, and almost all of the animals present in the painting are attacking each other, including members of their own species. Out of all of the paintings in Heffernan's current show, this painting's immense size and heavenly blue hues lend it a particularly reverent quality. The looming central figure wears a brilliant bejeweled skirt and a headdress of kinetic crystals evocative of a halo. It is important to note that when Heffernan paints the female figure, often the figure's genitals are concealed by a skirt while the torso is left bare. Heffernan states that "In the beginning the figures were nude for no better reason than that was how I saw them in my mind's eye. Slowly I came to want to cover them but not with any kind of typical clothing. I wanted the so-called skirts to be alive in some way, as if the fruit or roses covering them were arrested at the point they were falling from the tree and the next second would be on the ground, but the painting crystallizes that moment just before. What the skirts are made of are, in a sense, metaphorical equivalents for the subjectivity of the figure. There's fecundity and chaos at the same time; the beautiful and the ugly." Significantly, the female artist portrays herself not as a pliant, reclining female waiting to be possessed by the male, but as an erect, luminous and large figure whose gaze oftentimes challenges the viewer.



Self Portrait with Birds on My Head

An architectural structure reminiscent of either a government or religious institution crumbles on the lower left-hand corner, a visual leitmotif that runs through many of Heffernan's works including [Self Portrait with Birds on My Head](#) (67" x 52", oil on panel, 2006). When asked about this ambiguous structure the artist replied that it was shaped like a "baptistery, or a breast." Heffernan went on to add that she grew up practicing Catholicism, and as she sat in church she "yearned for the images to be real, that the statues could talk to me," even though she sensed the insincerity of the church's doctrine. In *Self Portrait with Birds on My Head*, lizards crawl suggestively up and down the figure's skirt to pool in the crumbling structure. Likewise, lights from the figure's dress in *Self Portrait as Tender Mercenary* seem to hit the "baptistery" and cause tiny explosions as a mother deer prods her dead fawn just in front of the building. The placement in the lower left-hand corner could refer to the artist's psychological disdain for the institution of religion, while Heffernan agreed that the structure's decrepit state reflects another level of commentary.

Heffernan is able to unfold layer upon layer of meaning in her sensual, psychological dramas. As prolific as she is profound, Heffernan is able to draw in

the viewer and keep her engaged in the quest for meaning long after the viewing experience has ended. Through Heffernan's sumptuous depiction of her inner world, she is able to access something much more universal and diffuse. Her self portraits depict not only the artist but the subjective self; the imagery, drawn from and inspired by a dream-like process, reflects an unconscious understanding of our erotic, chaotic, and politically challenged world. Her paintings are almost guaranteed to delightfully infect the dream world of the engaged viewer.

Heffernan's work is currently showing at the Neuberger Museum of Art in Purchase, NY, until 1/27/2007. Her work is on permanent display at PPOW Gallery in New York, Robert Kidd Gallery in Michigan, Lisa Sette Gallery in Arizona, Peter Miller Gallery in Chicago, and the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts. Her work can be purchased from PPOW, 212-647-1044 www.ppowgallery.com, and Catharine Clark Gallery (415) 399-0675 www.cclarkgallery.com.

- Rachel S. Rosen

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