

LEEZA DOREIAN

Syllables of Plush



W O M E N & T H E I R W O R K

JULY 30 - SEPTEMBER 5, 1998
AUSTIN, TEXAS

THE EDGE OF COMFORT

All the letters I can write

Are not as fair as this

Syllables of Velvet—

Sentences of Plush,

Depth of Ruby, undrained,

Hid, Lip for Thee—

Play it were a Humming Bird

And just sipped—me—

Emily Dickinson

Fantasies of a passionate kiss aroused the ardor of Emily Dickinson over a century ago, even as her vividly romantic poem has the capacity to stir us now, with its allusions to sensuous fabric, the inexorable drives of the natural world, and their metaphoric connection to the human body—the tender lip. Such encounters—literary, physical or artistic—seem precious and unobtainable to many in a millennial age of quick time, synthetic environments and mediated experience. In a post-romantic, post-surreal, post-feminist world, what is the context, the time and place, for *eros* (defined as: the sum of all instincts for self-preservation; creative, often sexual, yearning, love or desire)? Can contemporary artists give voice to the erotic, or is it simply not legitimate or possible anymore?

Exhilarated by technical and formal challenges and committed to an art of provocative ideas, Austin-based painter Leeza Doreian has recently completed an ambitious body of new work. In a series of small-scale, jam-packed, attention-seeking paintings, Doreian explores artistic problems of abstraction and representation and defines her position on current theoretical issues of artifice, consumption and desire.



Wall Flower, 14" x 20", oil on panel, 1997

On the surfaces of simply constructed wooden supports, a self-contained world of unexpected spatial complexity greets the viewer. Overlapping circles and shallow spheres are the predominant visual motifs; their sweet-hued but dizzying depths and projections are made more confounding by Doreian's use of multiple kinds of light sources and framing devices. (See "Close," cover panel.) The painter's shifting perspective draws the eye in toward the picture plane, then repels it in rapid sequence. Her compositional strategy—to contrast intricate renderings of flattened and deep space with specific moments of *trompe l'oeil*, three-dimensional imagery—results in a kind of postmodern space/time confusion. *Where is this? When was that?*, or, in painter's terms, the illusionistic object has weight when viewed in particular, but dissolves into a field when seen from a distance as part of the whole. These works at first might seem a "quick read" by virtue of their recognizable forms and distinct focal points, but they require concentration, even stamina, to negotiate.

Doreian's topic is still life, her array of objects an uncomfortable juxtaposition of the nostalgic and the suggestive—part grandma's attic, part softcore boutique. No dignified displays of precious, symbol-laden possessions here. Instead, passages of pretty patterns nestle next to startlingly seductive imagery. Delicate pink nipples, exposed or veiled with tasseled sequins, casual puffs of luxurious fabric, staggered layers of sugary confection—all the hyper-real details of Doreian's dense compositions evoke the dull aches of temptation and desire. But why? Why would a smart young feminist painter use illusions of pasties and wedding cakes and purple lace in her works?

The sexy, the pleasing, the innocent and familiar accoutrements of "girl-ness" are hard to look at in an era of shock tactics and cynicism. Two decades after Judy Chicago's "The Dinner Party," the issue is not identity but authority. By recasting on her own terms stereotypical images that have been made provocative and disturbing, or have been eroticized for

commercial purposes by the culture-at-large, Doreian aims to question and redeem the “feminine.” Can romance and irony and the erotic co-exist? Does strategy season intimacy and vulnerability? *We can own our own pleasure*, Doreian seems to say in these paintings, which feature tantalizing objects and materials, de-sensationalized but still possessing their seductive, multi-layered associations. By posing these questions, she stakes a claim for a feminine model of consumption, one that is neither aggressive nor guilty, but is instead authoritative and satisfying.

Exploiting her own personal infatuation with objects, her marvel at their permanence, and working from direct observation of set-ups in her tiny studio, Doreian creates perceptual *petit fours*—intensely appealing concentrations whose appearance and substance are two different things. In “Reveal and Conceal” the tricks of the (painter’s) trade are both clever and enticing. The almost-vertical diptych format, here a sly, anatomical pun, raises questions of primacy and subordination that are resolved through illusion and appetite. The work is a tease, skewering the social mores and value structures encoded within the tradition of still life painting. (Hanging nearby this work in the artist’s studio was a postcard image of a Renaissance madonna and child—nurturing, chaste breasts modestly draped—an apt contrast, but a reminder, too, of the virgin/whore polarities in our culture which still must be exposed and questioned).

Complex processes of memory and association inform an individual’s definition of the sensual and the erotic. Doreian uses decorative fabric and wallpaper designs, some reminiscent of her grandmother’s house (the ultimate safe place to be a girl), to introduce rhythmic patterns and layers of visual seduction to her work. The baroque conjunction of fuschia leopard print and

gold lace doily in “Fuschia Sizzle” is thus charged with multiple symbolic, as well as visual, functions. Yet Doreian cautions that personal history is a secondary aspect of the work. The interwoven dynamics of generating formal structure and paint application, of crafting subtle changes within ordered visual systems, delivers a heady intellectual pleasure that this artist craves. Citing the history of design, Doreian updates the notions of Emily Dickinson’s contemporary, the English poet, artist and socialist William Morris, to describe her goals. Morris’s close-hued, floral wallpaper patterns influenced “Paper Cake”; even as he drew from nature, she draws from his manmade reproduction, one level more removed from direct experience. It was of the design of wallpaper and other domestic fineries that Morris wrote when he stated that the “lesser arts” could—and should—express a union of reason and sensuality, utility and beauty. With the advent of an all-encompassing popular culture, a contemporary thinker might dismiss distinctions between “lesser” and “fine” arts; in these new works, Doreian draws from her experience with jewelry design, cake decoration and quilting, as well as her years of formal painting study. As she states, it’s the “contrast and coexistence of rational ordering and visceral sensuality” that she’s hoping to illuminate.

Like most recent art, Leeza Doreian’s paintings participate in a dialogue with works that inform and influence them. One thinks of the surrealists, especially Meret Oppenheim, and the first generation of feminist artists, not just Judy Chicago but also Joyce Kozloff and even Eva Hesse. Contemporary artists whose works reverberate for Doreian include Lari Pittman, who also explores pattern as the place where order and sensuality meet, and whose ribald and lusty paintings signal his comfort with erotic celebration, with tawdry elements that he deems the “beloved

and despised.” Vija Celmins poetic treatments of the microscopic and the universal, of realms almost beyond human visual perception, inform Doreian’s understanding of abstraction and artifice. Ross Bleckner’s paintings of light, which emphasize its dual optical and psychological properties, as well as his ability to combine irony with a romantic notion of painting, provide a model for her. Doreian’s new works evidence a careful reading of recent paintings by the Brazilian artist Beatriz Milhazes, whose compositional strategies and analyses of illusionism, decorative pattern and light provide a successful model for adaptation by a resourceful and insightful younger artist with similar formal concerns. Doreian’s certainly looking at all the right people. One could even think of Robert Gober’s 1989 “Male and Female Genital Wallpaper,” an intimate and subversive work that harkens back to Andy Warhol’s “Cow,” as a predecessor to Doreian’s linking of the decorative, provocative and utilitarian.

Doreian sees painting as a means to “own the moment, lock it down and hold it there.” The act of creation, and its resulting object, lends an illusion of permanence to the process of living. Her focus on minute detail—labored, repeated, intimate—creates an exaggerated awareness of what has been choreographed and controlled for the purpose of visual delight. Knowing it is only an illusion, understanding that this state of longing which a still life can evoke can never be satisfied, provides a tension, an edge, which is very comfortable for Leeza Doreian as she pursues her search for order and meaning.

Annette DiMeo Carlozzi
Curator of American & Contemporary Art
Jack S. Blanton Museum of Art
The University of Texas at Austin

LEEZA DOREIAN

BORN IN WIVENHOE, ENGLAND, 1968

RESIDES IN AUSTIN, TX AND NEW YORK CITY

Figure Painting,
Figure Drawing,
Beginning Drawing

EDUCATION

The University of Texas at Austin

Master of Fine Arts, May 1997

Ohio State University

Bachelor of Fine Arts, May 1993

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

The University of Texas at Austin

Lecturer

Aug. 1997-present

Beginning Drawing,

Two Dimensional Design,

Assistant Instructor

Aug. 1996-Jan. 1997

Two Dimensional Design

Teaching Assistant

Aug. 1994-May 1997

SELECTED EXHIBITIONS

Women & Their Work, Austin, Texas

"Syllables of Plush", Solo exhibition, July '98

Fine Arts Center, Lubbock, Texas

FAC Annual: Juried Exhibition, Jan. '98

(Juror: Dave Hickey)

W. David Stedman Center, Asheboro, NC.

An Eye on Nature: Juried Exhibition, Oct. '97

Gallery Lombardi, Austin, Texas

MFA AT UT: Group Exhibition, May '97

Huntington Art Gallery, The University of Texas at Austin

6: Masters of Fine Arts Exhibition, May '97

Huntington Art Gallery, The University of Texas at Austin

The Faculty Show: Group Exhibition, Oct. '96

The New Gallery, The university of Texas at Austin

Recent Work, 1996: Two Person Exhibition, Oct. '96

University of San Antonio, San Antonio, Texas

MFA at the CAA: Curated Group Exhibition, Nov. '94

Roy G BV Gallery, Columbus, Ohio

Objects of Memorandum: Two Person Exhibition,
May '93

King House, Columbus, Ohio

Ohio Bead Art Work Show: Juried Exhibition,
Oct. '92

AWARDS AND DISTINCTIONS

Studio Arts Merit Award, University of Texas at Austin, 1997

Graduate Continuing Fellowship, University of Texas at Austin, 1996

College of Fine Arts Travel Fellowship, Italy,

University of Texas at Austin, 1996

College of Fine Arts Travel Fellowship, Mexico City,

University of Texas at Austin, 1996

Studio Arts Merit Award, University of Texas at Austin, 1996 and 1997.

Emily Maverick Miller and Emily Wells Endowed Scholarship, University of Texas at Austin, 1994



Paper Cake, 28" x 38", oil on panel, 1998



Cover Image: *Close*, 18" diameter, oil on panel, 1997

Inside Flap: *Reveal and Conceal*, 8.5" x 4", oil on panel, 1998

Back Image: *Fuschia Sizzle*, 36" x 48", oil on panel, 1998



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Now celebrating its 20th anniversary, Women & Their Work presents over 50 events a year in visual art, dance, theater, music, literature, and film. The gallery features on-going exhibitions of Texas women artists and brings artists of national stature to Texas audiences. Since its founding, Women & Their Work has presented 1505 artists in 180 visual art exhibitions, 81 music, dance, and theater events, 19 literary readings, 12 film festivals, and 118 workshops, in programming that reflects the ethnic and cultural diversity of this region. Nationally recognized, Women & Their Work has been featured in Art in America, ArtForum and National Public Radio and was the first organization in Texas to receive a grant in visual art from the National Endowment for the Arts.

Women & Their Work reaches over 5,000 school children and teachers each year through gallery tours, gallery talks with exhibiting artists, participatory workshops, in-school performances, dance master classes, and teacher workshops.



WOMEN & THEIR WORK
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