

ANGELA FRALEIGH

there i still my thirst



WOMEN & THEIR WORK

FEBRUARY 16 - MARCH 25, 2006

AUSTIN, TEXAS



that i may somehow take on the weight of your sadness. 2005, Oil on panel. 6' x 8'.

THRUST AND ACHE:
THE PAINTINGS OF
ANGELA FRALEIGH

*She can't touch his arm in innocence again.
They have to give that up and begin
as male and female, thrust and ache.*

—Louise Gluck, “Palais des Arts”

On the surface, the umpteenth reissue of King Kong may seem totally unrelated to Angela Fraleigh's paintings. And yet, as one publicity image after another descends upon us, one might argue that there is a connection. In nearly every still, a large black figure embraces and nearly obscures a woman, her skin pale and luminous. Sometimes she appears to fight him off, other times she seems sympathetic, even submissive. This ambiguity is what has kept the story fresh after so many retellings. “I am your mirror, Beauty,” said the Beast, in Jean Cocteau's *Beauty and the Beast*. “You reflect me. I shall reflect you.”¹

A far more sophisticated and complicated version of the relationship between Beauty and the Beast is an important element in Fraleigh's paintings. In her recent work, two styles seem to be fighting one another: abstraction and figuration. In *there i still my thirst* (2005), a green eye, bright as an emerald, glares at us. The rest of the face belonging to the eye is almost all there: there is a jaw line, an eyebrow, a nose. Any other body part is blocked by a goopy mass of paint swirls in jade, cream, and taupe, although in the lower left quadrant, peering out from a gap in the veil of paint, is the head of a predatory bird. The angle of the bird's head echoes that of the woman, as though they are both on the hunt. In the painting *slow* (2005), a woman's head is tilted at a backward angle that leaves her neck exposed, and she gazes out at the viewer with a calm, studied expression. This is surprising, since a masculine hand is clamped firmly down on her neck. And yet the viewer has no way of knowing if

the hand is placed there for malicious purposes or as a gesture of affection or erotic play, for just as one begins to question the nature of the situation, and look for clues, a sumptuous, buttery yellow layer of paint oozes over the scene, preventing the viewer from figuring out what is happening, mischievously revealing only the most tantalizing of clues, such as an eye.

Indeed, eyes are featured prominently in Fraleigh's work. This raises several interesting issues related to women in art, as well as the act of looking at art. What happens when the woman, who has long been objectified in Western art, reverses the gaze, and looks back at the viewer? Barthes once described Garbo's eyes as “two faintly tremulous wounds.”² In a sense, the eyes in Fraleigh's paintings have a similar quality, although they also have more life and soul than the empty gaze of the movie star. They stare directly out at the audience, sometimes

with an air of confrontation, other times merely curious, and other times betraying a feeling of apprehension.

“To be born a woman has been to be born,” John Berger wrote, “within an allotted and confined space, into the keeping of men.” Women are associated with Beauty because women are thought of as objects. They are to be admired, or, better yet, to be possessed. Subjecting women to voyeurism—a controlled and unreturned gaze—was a way of owning them, of neutralizing the threat they posed to male power (for, in Freudian terms, women are symbols of castration, since small boys who see them naked assume that they have done something wrong to have lost their penises).

Yet the role of the woman and the male gaze was not always one of passive object being possessed by the man observing her. “Melancholy anguish caused by love for a woman,” or *Amor Hereos*, was a common problem among men in thirteenth-century Europe. Symptoms included insomnia and lack of appetite. “The whole body weakens,” wrote Doctor Bernard de Gordon (ca. 1258-1318) “except the eyes.”³ The eyes of the thirteenth-century nobleman who suffers from *Amor Hereos* are wounds, having been wounded by the sight of a woman. But, in a twisted (and somewhat illogical) paradox, once a man has been struck, the wounds enhance his vision, because that is the only way the man can watch his beloved. Eyes are apertures to the spirit, which has been contaminated, as it were, by the woman. The woman is the source of his agony and also his only source of succor, since even though his eyes are wounds, they are also the only way that he can find relief from what is ailing him: by reestablishing contact with the cause of the inflammation, the object

of his obsession—the woman. Although there is something sweetly absurd about this idea (one possible cure was to hire an “old shrew” to taunt the man and turn him off young women forever), it also posits the woman as penetrator, a role typically reserved, of course, for the male.

This is key to understanding Fraleigh’s work, since it consciously plays on ambiguities, on being at once vulnerable and fierce, concealed and exposed. The artist often references historical painting, but without directly appropriating from any one painting or artist in particular. One exception to this rule is *all consequence as soon forgotten*, 2005. A large painting, twelve by eight feet, it shows a shapely woman lying on her side, propped up by one elbow. The viewer sees her profile, a head crowned by silken strands of platinum blonde hair pulled up into an elaborate, eighteenth-century-style hairdo. The woman is looking slightly askance. She seems to be focused on the full lips and distinctive jawline of what appears to be a man, who is much larger than she. A hand, possibly his (although layers of paint again prevent one from being sure), reaches toward the woman. The gesture of the hand and the reclining figure of the woman evoke Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel. Fraleigh seems to have a nagging preoccupation with historical Western painting—it is nagging because she takes issue with the way it furthers gender stereotypes, but it is a preoccupation because it is a passion. Her love for historical painting, and indeed, the act of painting itself, is palpable.

Which brings us to the theme that has been nipping at the heels of this essay from the beginning: beauty. For how does one wrestle with the legacy of figurative painting and produce an image of a woman that somehow undoes years of

subjugation? The answer lies in being honest, in creating an image that is both beautiful in the traditional, conventional sense of the word, and beautiful for being challenging, for being bold, for being angry. The answer is that Beauty need not equate with passivity. In conclusion, it is useful to quote Elaine Scarry, who is quoting Simone Weil:

“At the moment we see something beautiful, we undergo a radical decentering. Beauty, according to Weil, requires us ‘to give up our imaginary position as the center... A transformation then takes place at the very roots of our sensibility, in our immediate reception of sense impressions and psychological impressions’...It is not that we cease to stand at the center of the world, for we never stood there. It is that we cease to stand even at the center of our own world. We willingly cede our ground to the thing that stands before us.”⁴

Claire Barliant
Associate Editor, *Artforum*

¹ Quoted by David Levi Strauss, “Beauty and the Beast, Right Between the Eyes,” *Between the Eyes: Essays on Photography and Politics* (New York: Aperture, 2003), 106.

² Roland Barthes, “The Face of Garbo,” *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), 56.

³ Ioan P. Couliano, *Eros and Magic in the Renaissance*, trans. Margaret Cook (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 20-21. All further references to Dr. Bernard de Gordon and *Amor Hereos* are based on this source.

⁴ Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), 111-112.

ANGELA FRALEIGH

Resides in Houston, TX.

EDUCATION

- 2003 Master of Fine Arts in Painting/Printmaking,
Yale University School of Art, New Haven, CT
1998 Bachelor of Fine Arts in Painting Magna Cum
Laude, Boston University, Boston, MA

AWARDS AND RESIDENCIES

- 2005 *Louis Comfort Tiffany Award Nominee*
2004-05 *Eliza Randall Prize*, Glassell School of Art,
MFA, Houston, TX
2003-05 *Core Program* Glassell School of Art MFAH,
Houston, TX
2003 *Alice Kimball English Traveling Fellowship*
1994-98 *Dean's Scholarship*, Merit Based award,
Boston University, Boston, MA

SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2006 *there i still my thirst*, Women & Their Work,
Austin, TX
2005 *forever is not enough*, Inman Gallery,
Houston TX

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

- 2005 **Aqua Art Fair** Miami Beach, Florida
(with Inman Gallery)
New Texas Painting, Diverseworks
Houston, TX
New Texas Acquisitions, Museum of Fine Arts
Houston, TX
Evidence, Inman Gallery, Houston, TX
CORE exhibition, Glassell School of Art,
Museum of Fine Arts Houston, TX
Artists for Tsunami Relief Auction, Phillips de Pury & Co.
Art LA, Inman Gallery, Los Angeles, CA
**Drama, Romance, Loneliness, Neurosis and many more
diseases of the soul**, Massimo Audiello, New York, NY
2004 **48: HOURS** Project Row Houses, Houston, TX
Blue Star 19: the anniversary show, Blue Star, San Antonio, TX
Art on the Avenue, benefit auction, Houston, TX
Summer Drawings and Some Are Not...Mixture,
Contemporary Art, Houston, TX
CORE exhibition, Glassell School of Art, Museum of Fine Arts
Houston, TX
2002-03 **Diamonds fur kiss Mom & Dad birds**. MFA Thesis Exhibition,
Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, CT
CAA Exhibition, Hunter College NY, NY
Second Year Graduate student show,
Yale University Arts Gallery
Work Crew Show, Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, CT
Exhibitions Curated Suburban, Wesley Heiss, Project Space,
Museum of Fine Arts Houston, TX

COLLECTIONS

Museum Fine Arts Houston, TX
Oil Arts Inc.
Trammel Crow
TPR International



breast. 2005, Oil on panel. 6' x 8'.

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2004 Leclere, Mary. Unpublished text for the Museum of Fine Arts Houston, TX. March.
Goddard, Dan R. "Review: "Blue Star 19" decks the walls with variety." *San Antonio Express-News issue. November*. San Antonio, TX.
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2002 Henderson, Tina. "The Feminine Mystique." *Artsy Magazine*. November.
2001 Hackett, Regina. "Seven good reasons to get back in the swing of the gallery thing" *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*. March 23. Seattle, WA.
2000 Hackett, Regina. "Honey They Shrunk the Art. Artists rise to reductive tasks." *The Seattle Post Intelligencer*, Thursday, November 2, pg.1. Seattle, WA.
Minnick Benjamin. "The artful Business is Booming" *Daily Journal of Commerce*, Wednesday, February 9, pg.1.



This Panel: *there i still my thirst.* 2005, Oil on panel. 6' x 8'.
Cover Panel: *before it had a name.* 2005, Oil on panel. 6' x 8'.



so as to lose you a little less. 2005, Oil on panel. 6' x 8'.

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