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ART REVIEW; A Show With Touches Of Humor and Anger

By Phyllis Braff
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PROVOCATIVE content goes along with much of the art associated with the feminist movement. This is certainly true in the case of Mary Beth Edelson, a New York artist whose 30-year career survey is making its final stop here at the state university after an extensive national tour. Reaching in many directions and often probing cultural history, the two- and three-dimensional pieces in various media in this show blend touches of anger, aggression and the kind of humor intended to tweak.

An installation plan that emphasizes thematic content rather than chronology brings attention directly to the meatiest, most absorbing pieces: clever drawings that alter familiar images, like film stills, to convey a completely revised, socially charged narrative. These new scenarios challenge the stereotype of a seductive glamour girl. Marilyn Monroe is cast as a radical feminist in one example and as a dressmaker considering her scissors as a weapon in another.

Ms. Edelson is at her best when she inserts old clichés and games to reinforce her message, as in the drawing of a stoical Anjelica Huston holding a pistol but wearing a ribboned hat and engaged in the daisy-petal routine, "He loves me, he loves me not."

Ms. Edelson turns to the idea of a gun-wielding femme fatale often to suggest the complexity of gender roles that traditionally permit men to be aggressive but expect women to be docile and enticing. Her images of these women, enlarged onto 12-foot high chiffon hangings -- the show's most dramatic elements -- are themselves assertive and underscore how the most successful social statements in art base their impact on the right mix of material and method. Here, the fabric's transparency is a metaphor for looking through a facade, or an outer skin, to find reality.

Fictionalized concepts of reality in films appeal to Ms. Edelson, but movie celebrities also are a way to involve the viewer. Her interactive visitor projects, which she calls story-gathering boxes, pick up on this direction in another section of the exhibition. They pose consciousness-raising questions like, "What did your mother teach you about men?"

There is a lot of consciousness-raising in the area devoted to paste-ups prepared for translation into politicized posters during the 1970's. Protesting male domination of the art world, the posters did much to further Ms. Edelson's reputation.

But insertions of likenesses of women artists in reproductions of Rembrandt, Ingres and Leonardo now seem more important as documents of their activist era. It is not that they are any less arrogant; rather, commonplace computer-manipulated photographs have made persona revisions overly familiar.

Ms. Edelson has also been looking back to the goddesses of ancient times and to the myths of other cultures. To portray these references to female power, photographs reveal the artist doing her own role playing, then frequently adding pigment over the primary image. When the paint marks off separate, signlike shapes, the sense of ritualistic symbolism is underscored. When thin paint ribbons imply movement and gesture, they extend the meaning to include time-based performances.

As identity statements, some of these photographs may appear a bit strained. But as social provocation they step solidly in the spirit of feminist art which, since the 1970's, has used autobiography and the body to further issues of gender.

"Mary Beth Edelson: Re-scripting the Story, 1970-2000" is at the Art Gallery at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, (631) 632-7240, through April 13.

Original Article:

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