

# Reframing feminine identity

Contemporary womanhood is the focus of the photographs and videos featured in Orange County Museum of Art's 'Girls' Night Out.'

By CHRISTOPHER KNIGHT  
Times Staff Writer

**T**HE two most important American artists to emerge into international prominence in the 1980s were Mike Kelley, working in Los Angeles, and Cindy Sherman, working in New York. Each produced brilliant art — Kelley, poignant installations around the monstrous strain of modern adolescence; Sherman, dazzling photographic self-portraits that quiz identity in a mass-media age.

What separated Kelley and Sherman from the rest is that both also became emblems of larger transformations in American culture. Kelley's exuberant rise to international standing, which in Europe sometimes approached the clamor around a rock star, signaled the definitive end of New York's post-World War II dominion over new art. Sherman's stunning preeminence as the artist who finally brought photography to a status long reserved for painting announced the irreversible success of feminism as a cultural imperative.

At the Orange County Museum of Art, an ambitious new exhibition demonstrates the breadth and depth of those acute transformations. Several of the 10 international artists whose work is on view are progeny of the alteration Kelley and Sherman represent. All are women. Only one works in New York. All use cameras. Youth culture is a frequent focus.

"Girls' Night Out" was organized by OCMA curators Elizabeth Armstrong and Irene Hofmann. It brings together 66 large-format photographs and video installations by women who might be said to engage a poetics of contemporary feminine identity. And power, whether personal or social, is rarely contested, as it often was in earlier feminist art; here, it's imbued with an almost casual self-confidence.

The show's knockout work is a 1996-97 video projection by Dutch artist Rineke Dijkstra. Filmed at dance clubs in Liverpool, England, and Zaan-dam, Netherlands, it's an infectious, empathetic meditation on contemporary feminine sexuality — "Girls Gone Wild" for inquisitive grown-ups, rather than for immature, hormone-addled boys.

Dijkstra set up her [See 'Night Out,' Page E4]



Courtesy of the Orange County Museum of Art

**RINEKE DIJKSTRA:** An awkward Polish girl is transformed in a pose recalling Botticelli's Venus.



# Engaging a poetics of female identity

['Night Out,' from Page E1]

camera before a white wall in a private back room at each club, then invited young women, and a few young men, to come inside. Alone or sometimes in pairs, they dance in place or bob their heads to the driving beat of house music, playing in the back-ground.

Dijkstra projects two images side by side, which lets you compare and contrast. Dressed to attract a partner, the kids exhibit the distinctive mix of shared yearning and solitary inwardness crystallized in dance clubs. And they run the emotional gamut — giddy, scared, forlorn, aggressive, stoned, self-possessed, obnoxious, etc.

The video has numerous potent antecedents, such as Bruce Conner's bracing 1966 film of a lone female dancer, "Breakaway." It also recalls Andy Warhol's famous screen tests for underground movies, in which being oneself for the camera was entangled with being a creature of mass media. And the portrait structure of Dijkstra's work owes a lot to Weimar-era photographer August Sander (1876-1964), who attempted to create a typological atlas of the German people.

Women were peripheral subjects for Sander — almost 90% of his tens of thousands of photographs are portraits of men — but Dijkstra pretty much reverses the ratio in her video. Likewise, her still photographs focus on young women. The most arresting is a large, lush portrait of an anonymous Polish girl; dressed in an ill-fitting, lime-green bathing suit, she stands awkwardly on a sandy beach at the Baltic Sea.

The gorgeous dominant color in the photograph is a cool range of blues, greens and grays, which makes the young woman's pale pink skin and dark blond hair seem fragile, almost brittle. Against this delicate likeness Dijkstra insinuates an image of enduring power, which resides in viewers' collective memory: The girl's carefully arranged seaside pose is somewhere between Botticelli's idealized Venus and Cézanne's restless "Bather." These echoes transform her into an



Courtesy of the Maureen Paley Interim Art

**SARAH JONES:** The photographer alludes to a favorite Pre-Raphaelite subject, Ophelia, in a large print.

iconic picture of durable strength.

Dijkstra's compelling art establishes the loose contours of the exhibition's larger thesis. Almost all the camerawork in "Girls' Night Out" exists in a peculiar space between documentary and fiction — between facts presented objectively and identity as an imaginative creation. Photography is merged with performance art.

Katy Grannan's photographs recall commercial pictures of the kind found in fashion magazines and on calendars — except that the elaborate studio paraphernalia characteristic of commercial photography is notably missing. Forget about coiffure and makeup, sophisticated sets and props. Her sitters and their settings are instead mundane. The result is subtly jarring, and makes you wonder about subliminal effects of media.

Kelly Nipper's four-screen video projection dismantles a feminine symbol of extreme athletic beauty. She hired a dancer to execute the difficult figure skating move known as a triple Lutz, which goes by so fast in competition as to be barely visible to any but a trained eye. Nipper's struggling dancer slows the jump down to the opposite extreme, attempting to stretch out

three turns over 60 minutes. She keeps losing her balance.

Next to this image is a close-up of a hanging mobile, weighted with beads of ice. As the beads melt, the mobile likewise wobbles. And next to this are two screens that show an ice rink photographed by a rotating camera — one spins to the left, the other to the right. Nipper's video environment is by turns ruminative and exhausting, not unlike its subject.

Dorit Cypis — at 52, the elder statesgirl of "Girls' Night Out" — has long examined the ways in which photographic representation can distort and deceive. Here, she includes several works that liken the process to being locked in a maximum security prison.

But her two most compelling pictures are more abstract. Each shows a window, its floral curtain softly illuminated from behind and blown by the breeze. Voluptuous, sensual, organic, radiant — stereotypical associations with femininity drift in on thin air. One translucent membrane seems to exhale, the other to inhale.

An achingly funny video by Elina Brotherus shows the young woman muttering under her breath while a stern, maternally, off-camera voice berates

her attempts to master ballet positions. And "Thriller," a short video by Salla Tykkä, transforms an anticipation of violence into a surprising moment of sly sexual triumph. Both works, in their heroines' quietly stubborn refusals to conform to expectations, are invigorating.

The remaining pictures in "Girls' Night Out" are pretty routine. Some suffer from formal problems, others from plain old dullness.

Eija-Liisa Ahtila chronicles social deterioration and psychological disintegration by fragmenting narratives on five video monitors dispersed around the room. Few of the fragments are compelling enough to galvanize your nomadic attention.

The documentary photographs of wealthy young Mexican women by Daniela Rossell, also seen last year at the San Diego Museum of Art's "Axis Mexico," are predictably off-putting as documents of conspicuous consumption. But as photojournalism they're run-of-the-mill. Similarly, Shirana Shahbazi plays safe with an innocuous wall mural composed from seemingly random portraits, landscapes and genre scenes photographed in her native Iran.

Sarah Jones is conversant with the history of British painting — her not quite life-size photographic portraits recall things like Pre-Raphaelite paintings of Ophelia adrift. But they have scant intrinsic interest.

When Dijkstra quotes from the history of painting, it's to pungent effect. "Girls' Night Out" is at its best when its pictures are full of life, both conceptually and formally.

## 'Girls' Night Out'

**Where:** Orange County Museum of Art, 850 San Clemente Drive, Newport Beach

**When:** Tuesdays-Sundays, 11 a.m.-5 p.m.

**Ends:** Jan. 25

**Price:** Adults, \$7; students, \$5; younger than 12, free

**Contact:** (949) 759-1122