

Dorit Cypis and Hildegarde Duane at Jancar Gallery

by Clayton Campbell

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Two collections of photographs at Jancar Gallery recollect and re-introduce us to 'historical' works by two important Los Angeles artists, Dorit Cypis and Hildegarde Duane. Both artists have been active in Los Angeles since the 1970's and are associated with feminist art making. Their works from 1977 – 1991 present distinctly different narrative strategies exploring issues of identity and self awareness. Cypis uses mediation techniques as a part of her practice, and the photographs at Jancar are a bridge to her current art making (her new work was recently on display at BANK gallery). In "Teratoma (cluster 1)", a salon style presentation of individual photos evokes a personal journey of change and self discovery. Some of the images employ a technique of overlapping projected images which she then photographed. Her "Psycho Portraits" advances this technique and reveal the interiority we carry with us.

In these pre-photo shop photos, Cypis invited the subjects of the portraits to enter into a trust building process. Artist and subject would meet six times, for a period of two hours each session. The subjects were asked to bring photos from the public domain they found personally compelling, either attractive or repellent. To create a visual environment, Cypis projected the images on her studio walls, and through movement the subject would begin to interact with the altered studio environment. At a certain point, Cypis would yell 'freeze', take a shot, and resume the session. The resulting 'frieze' moments, constructed with layers of projected and live imagery, are the "Psycho Portraits." A number of observations arise here as the artist seeks to break the surface of the photograph and manifest a dialogue. The first is that much feminist work from this period we are familiar with took an exterior approach to identity issues, leveraging social activism with visual social commentary. Cypis works against the pragmatic, American 'can-do' mind set by suggesting that for every political intention there is a psychological underbelly and that individuation is a marrying of interior and exterior realms. The portraits acknowledge the pervasive impact of cinema as images in American culture as a form of identification through what we connect with and store within us. "Psycho Portraits" contain a quality of transference that is poetic and psychological, working with personal mythologies and meta-narratives that go way under the surface.

Hildegarde Duane's narrative work, 'Fierce Fashions; 7 Snow Whites', is the other side of the coin- extroverted, linear and direct, with a humor and candor giving credence to why social commentary in the arts is a very good thing, indeed. Duane is a narrative artist and in the early 80's was making videos and photo/text series. Her work explored twists on cultural myths, feminine identity and the irony of expectation. "Fierce Fashions: 7 Snow Whites" could have been in the recent MOCA exhibition, WACK. Many of the sub-themes represented in that show are neatly synthesized in Duane's work. At Jancar, the artist's black and white photos are taped to the wall in a less than precious, anti-object stance. There is a text piece which tells the story of the 'seven snow whites', a gang of tough and bad ass brunette women of different ethnicities, who are on their way to rumble with the 'blonde' gang. Along the way they pick up a male dwarf who somehow allies with them. The story uses colors, gang rivals and the need of an 'outsider', (hence the dwarf, which has an entire mythology itself). Friends, actresses, artists and strangers posed for the '7 Snow Whites'. The images are quite funny in a manner that is engaging, and send up fashion, glamour, all with a hint of danger. Given the progression of aggressive imagery related to women and fashion the '7 Snow Whites' appear to be from a different era, albeit with a political agenda. 1981 was still the dark ages for women in America, and the photos jump out as a record, testament, and progressive narrative art when women were pushing the boundaries of multiculturalism.

It is instructive to see this work, realize how far the United States has come as a social experiment since 1981, and how feminist artists were a significant part of the process of building equity and assigning dignity. Several years ago in an interview with Bill Viola, we discussed how the media images we receive are stored within us for a long time (and the damage they can do). It becomes fairly important to be aware of what you let in, and as an artist, what you send out into the world. A hallmark of the Jancar exhibition is the notion of taking personal responsibility, which both artists address with authenticity and honesty. I am generalizing in saying that Cypis works internally and Duane externally, since both artists present works that are nuanced. Happily they meet in the middle in this smart and excellent pairing of artists.