

'Herstory' at the Napa Valley Museum

six-artist show celebrating Women's History Month at the Napa Valley Museum, *Herstory* inevitably begs the question: Have we come a long way, baby? And if so, have artists working today that happen to be women moved beyond the vaginal solipsisms of the Women's Lib Movement? The artists represented here—Dana Harel, Julie Heffernan, Miriam Hitchcock, Jennifer White Kuri, Gwen Manfrin and Patssi Valdez—offer a plurality of views in the ongoing feminist discourse. Rick Deragon, director of the museum and curator of this exhibition, is to be commended for having picked a group of artists whose works revolve freely around the show's premise and well beyond the dogma and attendant reprobations of previous generations. Instead, each artist contributes to a variegated chorus of celebrants.

A case in point is the work of Kuri, whose series of paintings, *The Dinner Club* (2006-09), convey a high-jinks version of the feminine adventure variously explored by the other five artists in the show.

Primarily executing her work with the spontaneity of a graffiti artist (Jean-Michel Basquiat without the raw ferocity), Kuri depicts a range of icons taken from commercial popular culture—mostly from fashion, liquor and perfume ads—and articulated dominantly in naïf-style scribbles and elegant painterly flourishes that hint at art historical tradition with pleasing facility. The works as a whole have an engaging, circus-like narrative celerity. However, the small cameo of Joan Brown, the California painter and an inspiring mentor to Kuri, in *Dinner Club #9* (2008-09), serves as a reminder that Brown's own fierceness of vision and anchoring facture are absent here.

Heffernan's work, in contrast, is deeply moored in a rich style redolent with appropriations from mostly sixteenth-century Northern European, painterly traditions, but also betraying at times the later, gracefully feathered brushwork of Watteau or Fragonard. She has thoroughly absorbed the male

gaze in continuing to portray women as objects of desire, albeit a woman's desire, most blatantly evident in *Self-Portrait With Girlfriends at the Ready* (1999-2008). Each of Heffernan's works here includes intricately miniaturized images surreptitiously tucked into larger motifs, functioning as para-narratives to the main event. In *Self-Portrait at Waters* (2006), twin-like nude women stand frontally side by side suggesting an Edenic couple shown under a lushly blooming arbor in a verdant setting. Tiny, all-male scenes variously depicting instances of archaic, male rage (shoot-outs, brawls, torture) are camouflaged into the overall scene while a diminutive Pinocchio with a carrot nose and "Stop Bush" placards appears like a forced punch line to an all-too-familiar joke. Heffernan takes on the legacy of feminist clichés but with a wink and a nod to the viewer, performing her deftly elaborate, Old-Masterish paintings with wise-guy cleverness.

The works of both Harel and Manfrin are predicated on traditional rendering techniques using basic materials such as graphite and colored pencils, inks and watercolor, and both convey a sense of girlhood. Harel's exquisite, haiku-like stacking of images hints at societal formative forces operative on delicate young women with consequences as deforming as geological ones. While Valdez's paintings feel like devotional offerings executed in brightly hallucinogenic colors and warped forms that celebrate domesticity and a sense that everyday objects glow with spirited intensity.

It is in Hitchcock's work, however, that one comes to a sense that the lessons of feminism have fully taken root; they are simply not an issue here. Each of her four works on view retains the sense that a work has been reconstructed from scratch. The works' paper supports have been processed and worked so extensively that they look

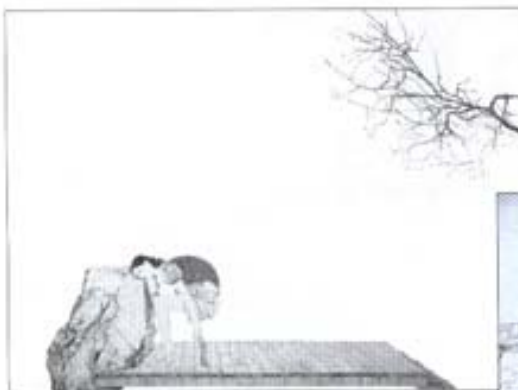
like skins hung out to dry. Their surfaces register a life's worth of incidents and insights, palimpsests with markings and residual images that percolate to the surface. A subtle comprehensiveness registers not just figures and portraits (the artist's familiar) but the slightest flicker of paint can acrobatically suggest a detail of a Roman fresco, perhaps, or a primal

landscape from our own collective memories. It is not just *her-story*, but everyone's.

—Hanna Hannah

Herstory: Dana Harel, Julie Heffernan, Miriam Hitchcock, Gwen Manfrin, Jennifer White Kuri and Patssi Valdez closed in April at the Napa Valley Museum, Yountville.

Hanna Hannah is a freelance writer based in Santa Cruz.



Clockwise from top: Dana Harel, *Gu'eridons*, 2007, graphite, colored pencil on paper, 30" x 40"; detail of *Gu'eridons*; Jennifer White Kuri, *Dinner Club Portrait #9*, 2008-09, mixed media on canvas, 48" x 48"; Julie Heffernan, *Study for Self-Portrait as Big Idea*, 2008, oil on canvas, 20" x 20", at the Napa Valley Museum, Yountville.

