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Arts Lead

Trick Or Treat

Lauren Kalman Dresses Up (and Down) At The Sculpture Center

By Douglas Max Utter

After decades of deep thoughts and skin-deep political correctness, American gender perception in the media and on the street is still a study in pink and blue. Roles have become more flexible, pay scales are somewhat more equitable, glass ceilings have at least cracked, and there's always Hillary. But the stereotypes remain, ingrained deeper than any postmodern scrub can reach. Gender continues to be one of the most important subjects of art in our time and may just be the central aesthetic subject of our civilization. At stake is nothing less than an ongoing reassessment of what it means to be human, presaging a liberation of psychic energies as potent as any advance in physics.

Lauren Kalman's ambitious installation, *A Pretty Little Trick*, which opens this year's Window on Sculpture Emerging Artist series, takes on the weight of our era's gender dysphoria with exuberant confidence and does an eloquent job of summing up key issues.

The Sculpture Center's two-part gallery challenges artists to bifurcate their installations, allowing for an intermission. In order to see both halves, visitors make their way from the main gallery in the rear building, along an alley to the back door of the smaller display area facing Euclid Avenue. This suits Kalman, who has a lot on her mind - enough for two or even three separate installations. The actual elements of the show are relatively sparse and tend toward understatement, but the volume of ideas they suggest make for a crowded



Bell Jar With mortar and pestle, from *A Pretty Little Trick*.

intellectual experience. At times *A Pretty Little Trick* seems almost like an episode of the TV drama *House*. Like one of Dr. House's interns, Kalman has improvised a set of evidence - everything from twin microscopes (one bare and horned like a crouching demon, the other veiled in a dust cover, like a bride) to videos of Kalman's legs jumping (three sets spliced together), a number of carefully boxed frog skeletons, full-sized hand-welded facsimiles of autopsy tables, two simultaneous soundtracks of an infuriating scratchy sound plus a heartbeat-like thumping of a trampoline in use, and much more. The scenario Kalman sketches is a medical/aesthetic crime scene, complete with hard evidence and possibly a few red herrings. It's an installation waiting for a diagnosis.

One of the large projected images screened in the main gallery shows Kalman in two reversed positions. In the first she is dressed as a male figure hanging by his teeth. In the other she is female, and equally uncomfortable; she stands on her head, her panties exposed as her shift falls away. Both are dressed in shimmering white. The impression is something like a Tarot card, consistent with other allusions here to medieval and particularly alchemical symbols of transformation. Metamorphosis, whether in Ovid's poems or a drag club, is often a matter of gender reversal, as the heat and force of antithesis is used to refine a new entity.

Kalman can be very subtle. It pays to look closely at the various objects arranged at wide intervals in the half-darkened space. Consider the two antique-looking bell jars, for instance, one in each gallery. The first displays a necklace. Little tangles of fine hair are caught between its pearls, as if the necklace had been ripped off a former owner by way of her head - or had rested on a hairy chest. The bell jar itself suggests isolation and sexual abstention, like Snow White's glass coffin or the bell jar in Sylvia Plath's 1963 novel of the same name, which dealt with the devastating psychological isolation of a young woman during the 1950s. The second bell jar ironically (I think) contains a mortar and pestle - a marriage.

Kalman gives us a whole bestiary of such signs and emblems to sort through. But it's clear that her main themes are the tensions between self-concept and sexual identification, purity and contamination. Kalman touches on feminist critical theorist Julia Kristeva's concept of "abjection" when she plays with the sexual nature of the psychic strain that pulls between perceptions of clean and dirty. Each of the three white enamel basins sitting on low platforms in different parts of the Sculpture Center either contains a slight stain or is partially encircled with a penumbra of rust - like long-dried blood. This is the moon of the asexual, undifferentiated self, enduring the eclipse of experience or threatened by the stories about itself it does not want to hear. The basins are like the hard facts that an artwork grows around, that might arouse either disgust or desire, equally capable of beauty or horror - entities at the edge of deep shadow.

In the smallest of the several video projections at *A Pretty Little Trick*, Kalman shows herself in a series of three 3-inch LEDs stuck to the wall. We see Kalman affixing a half goat's skull and jaw bone to her pelvis, binding her breasts as she wraps a bandage around and around her chest; and finally wrapping another bandage around her face, completely covering all her features. Among the possible interpretations of this pantomime is the simple truth that any identity defined by concealment or disguise must end in a loss of self, in a featureless anonymity.

A Pretty Little Trick: Through Feb. 16, at The Sculpture Center, 1834 E. 123rd St.

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