

## Exquisite Corpse

In Melissa Gordon's paintings, the whole is never a self-contained entity, but always a heterogeneous collection of interrelated fragments. Incorporating historical, socio-cultural, political and philosophical sources, the result of Gordon's exploration of feminist genealogies usually takes on the guise of an inventory: of stories and protagonists, but also of the physical traces of their mediated existence. Film stills, magazine clippings, book covers, and paintings are often combined in storyboard-like constellations, represented in their original format to function as signifiers in what seems to be an associative visual matrix. *The Satisfaction of Knowing* (2007), a large scale canvas that was central to Gordon's recent exhibition *Exquisite Corpse* at Ancient & Modern in London, is exemplary of this approach: the book covers of *The Portable Kristeva* and Jacques Derrida's *The Archeology of the Frivolous* are painted alongside various images taken from, amongst other sources, the 1970s Feminist magazines. By doing so, the artist shows interest in dissecting the legacy of a specific socio-cultural phenomenon as a semantic system, suggesting that its visual manifestations are readable as a comprehensive and logical referential language. In the case of 'inventory' or 'clipboard' paintings such as *The Satisfaction of Knowing*, meaning is generated not only by unveiling systematic connections between pre-existing imagery, but also on a more symbolic level: the background's deep reds, for example, reference *Womanhouse*, the seminal 1972 exhibition put together by Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro.

Across Gordon's oeuvre, the female figure is a recurring element: from the lone, cool, and self-assured heroine that dominates an entire painting to the anonymous women in the artist's representations of unspecified group photographs. More often than not, Gordon's women are engaged in some kind of performative activity. The 'performative' is a notion which has been closely associated with the cultural domain of Feminist art practice, enabling empowerment through a critique of existing power structures, and also a deconstruction of traditional patterns of social behaviour. In works such as *Futurist Construction* and *Contortions (Spinning Round)*, both form and subject matter are dealing with ideas closely connected to performativity. *Futurist Construction* is a three-dimensional object, shaped like a modernist abstraction somewhat reminiscent of a gaping mouth or clamshell, painted on the inside – both panels depicting female characters apparently involved in physical activities, such as sports or ballet. *Contortions (Spinning Round)* is a related attempt at physically extending the pictorial plane into space, creating a fierce, ominous-looking constructivist object. These works can be regarded as sculptural elaborations of their own subject matter, and as spatial continuations of the illusionism Gordon uses in her 'inventory' paintings. More importantly though, through expansion into space, these forms are able to suggest and 'perform' the gestural qualities that are the central focus of the artist's investigation.

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