Portrait of a Lady for a Contemporary Collection, 1978



Concepts of fashion advertising play a critical role in San Francisco artist Dianne Blell's recent work. For Blell, fashion advertising represents a form of social history, an art form which can define the aesthetic and ideological positioning of a culture. Portrait of a Lady for a Contemporary Collection, 1978, is a color slide image of the artist dressed in high fashion apparel and projected onto a temporary wall in Gallery 5 amidst the Museum's contemporary art collection. Posed in a manner similar to models on the pages of Vogue and Harper's Bazaar magazines, Blell is dressed in the latest styles of clothes and accoutrements. A text superimposed beside the image provides information on designers, prices, stores where the clothes are available, as well as cosmetic, styling and hairdressing credits.

In constructing the image Blell has imitated contemporary fashion advertising with acute precision. Each aspect of the project from her hair styling, makeup and manicure, to the photograph itself is the result of the skills of professionals connected with the fashion industry. Placed within the pages of a contemporary fashion magazine, the work would appear to be simply another fashion layout. Set within the context of the University Art Museum's permanent collection, however, it suggests a number of provocative relationships.

Blell's work bears an oblique relationship to portrait painting. Color photography has essentially replaced

painting as the dominant media for recording appearances. As such, Blell presents us with her notion of the most current form of portraiture, a fashion layout. The female image is, of course, central to fashion advertising and Blell's enticing eye contact and body posture in the photograph suggest an attitude toward female imagery that typifies the treatment of women throughout the history of painting. Comparing Ingre's alluring Comtesse d' Haussonville, 1845, or any recent Vogue advertisement, one message appears consistent: women, above all else, are meant to be attractive and sexually enticing, as much objects of desire as the paintings that record them or the products they advertise. Blell's "lady" in the context of the Museum's contemporary collection is stylized, refined, extravagently packaged and processed. She represents the persuasive force of seduction common to both art and media advertising. Unlike Ingre's vivid characterization of his subject, however, Blell, in keeping with media imagery, presents a portrait devoid of character. A seductive and highly superficial advertising symbol.

The utilization of the female image as subject matter is a typical aspect of Blell's work. In 1976 Blell presented Odalisque in cooperation with the Museum of Conceptual Art. An outdoor installation in the heart of the San Francisco strip club district, the work consisted of a photographic image, converted by a commercial outdoor advertising company into an immense 10' x 20' billboard painting. The subject of the image was

a reclining female nude, or odalisque, posed in sensuously draped surroundings according to the cannons of traditional painting. The face of the model was cropped from the picture, leaving an anonymous female form in a classical pose conspicuously set against the plethora of burlesque advertising which decorates the North Beach area.

In 1977 Blell installed Oasis for a Gallery at the John Berggruen Gallery in San Francisco. The work was a single 16" x 28" color print mounted and brightly illuminated on one wall of the gallery. The subject of the photograph was the artist seated nude astride a camel attended by a bemused camel driver in native robes. The photograph was taken in Morocco. Blell states she was interested in creating "an analogy between the occurrence of a single image within the austere gallery context and the small fertile area of vegetation or oasis that interrupts the arid expanse of desert." (Undated statement). Blell used a 1,000 watt quartz spotlight projected through an ellipsoidal lens which was framed onto the photograph in order to effect an intense mirage-like quality that permeated the gallery. She states, "I was interested in creating an environment from a single image." (Undated statement). Further, the paradoxical imagery presented in the photograph--a naked woman posing for a photograph in the context of a country and culture in which women traditionally cover their face and body from public view-drew attention to the cultural contrasts between Western and

Middle Eastern countries in regards to the social status and cultural image attached to women.

Dianne Blell was born in Los Angeles, California in 1943. She has attended the University of California, San Diego, and the San Francisco Art Institute (BFA 1973, MFA 1974). She lives in San Francisco.

MA

Works in MATRIX:

Portrait of a Lady for a Contemporary Collection, 1978, Slide projection, 74" x 61" (installed). Lent by the artist.

Special credits for technical assistance in the production of this work:

Lawrence E. Green - layout design; Romaine Perin - coordination and copywriting; Sharon Grace - video documentation. For their generosity in the loan of clothing, furs and jewelry, we would like to express our appreciation to I. Magnin, Revillon of Saks Fifth Avenue and Laykin Et Cie.

Selected one-person exhibitions:
San Francisco Art Institute,
'75; Museum of Conceptual
Art, San Francisco '76,
Odalisque, Billboard Installation; John Berggruen Gallery, San Francisco '77.

(June 15, 1977), p. 23.

Cultrone, Ronnie. "Art
in View," <u>Interview</u> (June
1977), p. 39.

Radice, Barbara. "Notes,"
<u>Flash Art</u>, no. 76/77 (July August 1977), p. 7.

Selected group exhibitions:
San Francisco Art Institute
'73; San Francisco Art Institute, Drawing Invitational,
'73; Oakland Museum of Art,
Oakland, CA, Bay Area Artists,
'75; Museum of Conceptual Art,
San Francisco '76; CARP, Los
Angeles CA, A Tight 13 Minutes, '77.

Selected bibliography by Blell:

Slash, vol. 1, no. 8 (February 1978), p. 2.

Selected bibliography about Blell:

McDonald, Robert. "Out-door Odalisque," Artweek, vol. 7, no. 29 (Sept. 1976), p. 12.

Kramer, Lawrence. San Francisco Examiner (Sept. 8, 1976).

Restany, Pierre. "Art USA '76," Domus, no. 565 (Dec. 1976), p. 52.

Morch, Alfred. "Desert Song," San Francisco Examiner MATRIX is supported in part by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, a Federal Agency.