

Valhalla Rising: The Dallas Contemporary's Redemptive Moment

19 Jan 2016 / Christina Rees / 1 Comment

If a discerning art person from out of town walked into the Dallas Contemporary right now, I think they'd be impressed. This hasn't always been the case. The Contemporary often carries three shows at a time (there still doesn't seem to be much talk of using less of the cavernous building), and while one of the three shows often ain't half bad, the other two sometimes feel like they're knocking around in an airplane hanger for no reason other than to fill space. Even seasoned international artists struggle to convincingly hold all that square footage with new work.



Black Sheep Feminism, installation view.

The current lineup works so well you'd almost believe this must always be true. The big left gallery hosts a show called *Black Sheep Feminism*. It's work made mostly in the 1970s by four radical feminist artists, and it's a wide-awake, rangy, sex-fueled exhibition and probably the best thing I've ever seen at the Contemporary. It's not "sexy" in the dumb, night-clubby way the Contemporary tends to fall back on to entertain the fashion crowd. It's dirty, and dingy, and you can smell the body fluid. It's like an analog red-light district run by Lizzie Borden.



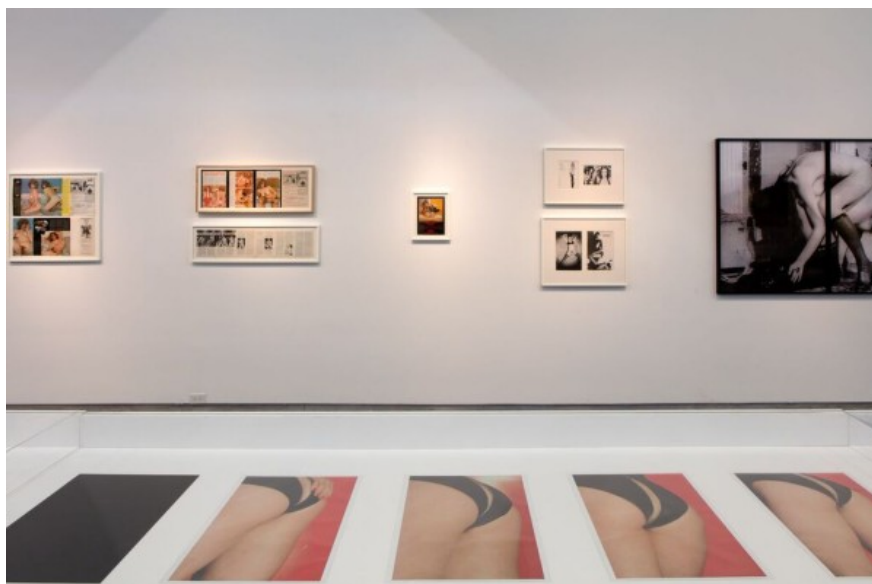
Jeff Zilm, *Cops*, 2014. (detail)

In the big right-hand gallery (as hostile an exhibition space as I've ever encountered in a dedicated kunsthalle), local-guy-made-good Jeff Zilm has all-new work that not only shows his range, but even more impressively responds to the weirdness of the space by being even more weird and hostile—the work comes together almost as an alien presence. The lighting on that side is cold and sick; he embraces it. It's a very cool show. He did break up the space into managable, more intimate rooms, but the work within them doesn't make your journey any cozier. It all hangs together—the paintings with the light boxes with the text pieces with the videos—with a chilly nihilism, and this is the smartest, most calculated approach to the Contemporary's space I've ever seen an artist engineer.



Aura Satz

The third (and smallest) gallery space hosts a solo show by London-based Aura Satz, which is video installation dealing with the history of women working with ballistics data in wartime (you read that right), and carries through the buzzy, mechanized feel of Zilm's show. They're strangely simpatico. In fact, all the work in the Contemporary right now is assured and matter-of-fact. I get no sense of anyone trying too hard. I won't go into a description of Satz's work here other than to say that you get its gist pretty quickly, in the right way. There is something striking about women professionally parsing the bloodier details of mens' wars, and it brings to mind a line from the latest *Mad Max* movie when one of the villain's stolen wives describes bullets as anti-seeds: "Plant one and watch something die."



Cosey Fanni Tutti

Back to the *Black Sheep* feminist show; really, you should go see it. Artists Betty Tompkins, Joan Semmel, Anita Steckel, and Cosey Fanni Tutti weren't always on the same page on how to deal with explicit sexual content in their work, but they all went for it full throttle, and were all marginalized by the larger second-wave feminist movement because of it. The bottom-line concern is how to reclaim sex (as in fucking) as a subject matter, and to fight against the then-growing consensus that all sexual content, as it proliferated through porn, was the right and bailiwick of paternalism—a notion from which a certain new puritanism followed, which we live with to this day. These women scoffed at this early type of PC censorship. (For Cosey Fanni Tutti, this meant becoming something of a '70s magazine porn star, and her work is the documentation of that process. If you ever found your dad's stack of *Private* or *Fiesta* mags in 1978, you may have spotted her.) All of this requires you keep in mind when they made the work—most of today's Instagram exhibitionists don't quite grasp whose coattails they ride. It would be easy to dismiss Betty Tompkin's big photo-realist paintings of

closeup hetero penetration—dicks inside cooches—if you didn't realize she made them all around 1970. Richard Phillips (whose painting of a squirting vagina greeted visitors at the Contemporary in 2014) was maybe hitting puberty around that time.



A Betty Tompkins Fuck painting from 1973.



Jeff Zilm: Installation view.



As for Jeff Zilm's show: Zilm has lately shot onto the international art market via his "film" paintings, which are really a kind of zombie abstraction complete with foundation gimmick—but they are good. The recent ones are good at least, now that he's really having some fun with the space within them. He buys old print reels of movies (especially rare or otherwise extinct ones), dissolves the magnetic emulsion coating (the film content, as it were) into a bucket of sludge and mixes it with paint to make these fantastic, misty, non-figurative-but-almost-figurative paintings on canvas. The paintings really are abstract, but Zilm has gotten so deft at implying dimension and movement and ghosted impressions (though the overall effect is purely atmospheric) that some people (his collectors?) search them the same way we all search for something recognizable in the clouds. They want to see some sign of a cop movie in the painting *Cops* (2014), and they want to believe that the painting holds the essence of the destroyed film, or even expands on it. This is fine. I want Zilm to ride that concept to the bank. He's smart

and he deserves it, and even without knowing the gimmick, the new paintings hold a room. There are a handful of them here, and they anchor the show. They're very, very gray personalities: everything in Zilm's show—even when it's a rich blue (as in the text pieces) or moving and backlit (like the videos) looks gray. This is all really good, because it's the opposite of pandering. Walking through his side of the Contemporary is like walking through a singed forest of cables inside Zilm's head, and those cables are bringing you a highly unexpected (and often sardonic) message from another dimension. He wants to tell you something. His work is not a warm conversationalist, but listen.

Black Sheep Feminism, Jeff Zilm, and Aura Satz are on at the Dallas Contemporary through March 20, 2016.