



*Beauty in Flesh & Fur by David Cohen*

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There is plenty in Julie Heffernan's paintings to delight a traditionalist — and to offend a modernist. Ms. Heffernan is a shameless virtuoso, deploying extraordinary, painstaking, and yet unforced skill in descriptions of flora and fauna, and of feminine flesh, currently on view at P.P.O.W. Her display of technique is as wanton as the still-life motifs she piles on: Typically, in images that reek of opulence and overload, a comely young woman is nude but for a fantastical skirt composed of a pyramid-like mound of fowl, game, fruits, jewelry, and flowers. Beyond mere quotation or irony, there is an old master look to these highly wrought works, which are generally around 6 feet high by 5 feet wide. The specific points of reference are geographically and historically diverse, from Northern Renaissance to French Rococo, although the median look is Baroque. But they do not seem to be opting for anachronism per se. The use of old painterly languages is less tongue-in-cheek than hand-on heart — a means of accessing a dreamlike space of high imagination.

This sense of being about something is itself pre-, rather than post-, modernist. These paintings are a hybrid of genres and styles, mixing allegory, portraiture, history painting, and still life, while in title they are all presented as self portraits. But far from coming across as a collage-like jumble, the fusion of styles and genres is seamless.

These dynamic and intriguing compositions pack a punch, but at the same time, they are a slow read with their rich internal lighting, luxurious color, intricate workmanship, and the alluring choice of things of natural beauty — whether flesh or fur — for the viewer to enjoy.

That there is both consistency among the series and individuality to each image encourages a sense that these figures are allegorical. Enigmatic iconography makes the paintings seem surrealist, and they do tap some of the libidinal and oeneric features of that movement, but they have more in common with the kind of paintings collected by Rudolf II in [Prague](#) than with Surrealism

Ms. Heffernan's sense of self relates to lesser-known female Surrealists such as [Dorothea Tanning](#) and Leonara Carrington, but she eschews the faux naïveté of these artists, and more closely resembles [Dalí](#) in her virtuosity.

The three strongest pictures in the show all position their cornucopia-encumbered figure against a theatrical backdrop that is almost as involved and iconographically redolent as the foreground image. In "Self Portrait as Raising Cain" (2007) the bare-breasted protagonist clutches a pair of baby deer who spill into two larger deer (its parents perhaps), all festooned with pearls, rose garlands, and medals; behind her, and many times her size, is a looming female portrait. The drop in lighting and a variation in style (less life-like) makes this background portrait seem like a picture within the picture, even though it is bigger than the "real" woman and stuff in the front. A grid of evenly placed tiny blazing emblems, including skeletal bodily and facial details, such as teeth, in a tight, illustrative hand, adds another layer of reality. The foreground incident has a Titianesque quick painterliness whereas the big background portrait is more opaque.

"Self Portrait as Booty" also contrasts the reality of foreground and the artifice of background, although in terms that are richly relative. The woman has a lattice of brocaded hair that forms a cage-like structure to contain her "skirt" of peaches and animal quarry. It is painted as if physically credible, though it is not.

The vignettes behind her, meanwhile, are the other way around: In a stylized hand that recalls fête champêtre painting of the 18th century (Longhi, Watteau), they depict battle, hunting, or game playing scenes of often animal-headed figure in period costume against idyllic, 17th-century landscape. These scenes are contained within irregular puddle-like shapes set against a neutral monochrome ground.

"Self Portrait with Men in Hats" picks up a theme of her last show at the same gallery that positioned the woman against a large, blown-up detail of a tapestry with a martial theme. Again, there is a sense of a copied picture, cool and remote compared with the freshly observed one in front. Like the emblems in "Raising Cain" there is a shower of circular medallions between the woman and the tapestry, and these twist and turn to suggest the depth of real space.

They could be plates, canvases, or medallions, and each has a little portrait in a power crown of some sort. Several of the portraits are recognizable political figures such as [Condoleezza Rice](#) in a feathered headdress, as well as historical personages such as Rasputin.

So what are these about? There are enough components, and a purposeful energy, to make them seem to have meaning, if not a message. In less ecologically conscious ages than our own, the excess of hunting and gathering would unambiguously signal the blessings of plenty, whereas here, the juxtaposition of life and death, and the equations of wealth and beauty, and war and peace are made to feel ominous. Like the virtuosity with which they are made, the paintings seem to be guilty pleasures, shameless though the woman at the heart of it all appears to be.

While Ms. Heffernan has pursued a similar format in her work for much of her career, she constantly improves her handling of paint, the clarity of composition, the orchestration of effects. Improving, of course, might be what any artist does or hopes for, but with her it really matters in a way that contrasts with some of her contemporaries. If, like her fellow [Yale](#) alumni [John Currin](#) and Lisa Yuskavage, she was involved in a kind of neo-Dada "bad painting" exercise, she would always be okay: Her academicism would always work, conceptually, regardless if it was intended to be good or bad. Ms. Heffernan, on the contrary, needs to marshal a complex stylistic interplay of anachronism and authenticity for her work to find its meaning.

In fact, it is in the process of being made that her art finds itself. The formal balances and contrasts, as well as the play of one kind of handling against another, are not supporting effects to an a priori imagery, but are rather integral to the value and meaning of her work. Finding herself in the process of making, she is a modernist after all.

Until October 20 (555 W. 25th St., between Tenth and Eleventh avenues, 212-647-1044