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BODY OF EVIDENCE

Curated by Jane Neal

Ellen Altfest, Marlene Dumas, Nicole Eisenman, Caroline Walker

24 March - 10 April 2012

François Ghebaly Gallery is delighted to present *Body of Evidence*. The exhibition presents work by four women artists: **Ellen Altfest, Marlene Dumas, Nicole Eisenman** and **Caroline Walker**. Each features the body as a key part of her artistic practice, whether it be the main subject carefully scrutinised; a means to critiquing contemporary notions of identity; a focus through which to explore basic human desires and intentions (often disguised by social mores); or the projection of the artist's concerns with the performative aspects of 'being' a woman in a given space. The show considers how all four artists thus create a body of evidence for the viewer to peruse and assess.

The decision by the curator, Jane Neal, to bring together these four diverse painters was made in recognition of the changing attitudes and relationships between women's art and the body. Once used as a focus for the expression of so-called biological feminist ideas by women artists via performance, this *modus operandi* was rendered unfashionable in the 1980s by the apparently subsequent wave of interest in so-called theoretical feminist expression through language, the distancing process of signification, photography and the adoption of psychoanalytical texts. However the linear reading of women's art as 'evolving' from biological 'goddess' or 'mother earth' inspired motifs to a more coolly conceptual approach, has now been called into question. There is considerable evidence to suggest biological and theoretical approaches to the examination of the body in women's art practice not only co-existed from the 1970s onwards, but in fact corporeality has gained precedence in art from the mid 1990s to the present day, through becoming a centre of focus in women's painting.

Each artist in *Body of Evidence* could be described as working with 'the body politic' - though in very distinct and different ways - yet each is also deeply concerned with the nature of the medium they work in: the plastic possibilities of paint, the challenges, and the timeless nature of a medium that is arguably the most readily expressive and adaptable. *Body of Evidence* aims to draw the viewer into an enthralling encounter with flesh, desire and the boundaries of public and private space.

Ellen Altfest's subjects of choice are the male body and still life. Unlike many artists working today who favour the help of modern technology, Altfest prefers to work from life. It is this intense scrutiny that enables her to make paintings that are extremely focused to the point of obsessive, but also neither ugly nor beautiful. The style is not too far away from Freud's early work and his observations of his first wife, Kitty's green dressing down, each towelling loop delicately picked out and the short bristly hair of their dog meticulously described. In Altfest's case though, the viewer might find the coarse curly hair on a man's back and a few open pores, or the wrinkly sac of his testicles as his leg bends to provide the viewer with a close up view. In another work the viewer might find that the man is obscured by a macro close up painting of a cactus or gourd, a large stone or a piece of wood. This feels deliberate rather than accidental, as if the artist is communicating what she finds fascinating is in fact a section of object, or part of a man, not what it symbolises. Everything is broken down, turned over and minutely recorded with the dedication and precision of a research scientist.

Marlene Dumas uses the traditional subjects of Western painting such as the classically inspired nude or the funeral portrait to tackle some of the most pressing concerns of our age: the questions surrounding identity and the impact of racial, sexual and social stereotyping. Drawing from found imagery derived from photography (most notably polaroids), newspapers and magazines, Dumas translates the subjects of these sources into paint in a most remarkable way. She allows the nature of her material to infuse atmosphere and create narrative: inky splotches variously suggest decay, heightening passions, or tensions and embarrassment. Dumas specialises in intimacy, drawing in the viewer to an up close and personal view of her chosen subject; but while the viewer become an active, even avid participant in her game, the resulting experience can be awkwardly uncomfortable, even shocking.

Nicole Eisenman presents a heady, rich ensemble of situations most usually derived from her own experiences. Often comic in tone and diary-like, Eisenman's choice of colour and style reveals her fascination with both French and German expressionism. Of late her carefully planned group scenes have given way to an increased focus on heads or deconstructed bodies that tend towards the abstract, yet still there is the sense of an artist closely observing and commenting on her peers and society; paring down further and further until desire and explicit intentions are laid bare and no longer hidden by social mores.

In **Caroline Walker's** intimate paintings we witness women engaged in domestic activities that seem incongruous considering the starkly modernist houses we find them in. Often the women are dressed up in bizarre clothing, or performing tasks that appear more ritualistic than naturally expressive. They never meet our gaze and in Walker's hands, each woman is clearly a subject to be looked at, anonymous and vulnerable. She represents a 'private' face of woman that is in opposition to the air-brushed images of her found in magazines and mass media.

Intriguingly, although the women appear to have 'a room of their own' (as outlined by Virginia Woolf in 1929) that they are at liberty to do what they want in, this is itself a fiction spun by Walker. The artist makes it clear that what is apparently a sign of liberation can paradoxically become a prison; the women are at various times trapped, isolated, bored and frustrated. It is Walker, not the subject, who is free. The artist is at liberty to work as she wishes and to create and inhabit a 'virtual' world - but at the expense of the 'imprisoned' women. The dilemma could not be more clearly articulated: as the creator and director, Walker is the one with all the choices in this domestic scenario, while the model, still occupying her traditional role, remains subject to Walker's whim.

For further information, please contact the gallery at info@ghebaly.com, or visit our website www.ghebaly.com.