

Lisa Lichtenfels: Hyperrealism Made Mythic

Surely new standards for art world hype were set last year, when private art dealer Philippe Ségalot hired celebrity hair stylist Frederic Fekkai to style the wig on Italian artist Maurizio Cattelan's hyperrealist sculpture of model/actress Stephanie Seymour before it was photographed for the cover of an auction catalog. That Fekkai happens to be the real Stephanie Seymour's hair dresser, of course, only adds to the absurdity of a work of art being primped as if for the Academy Awards.

Long before Cattelan made news with his gussied-up effigy, the American fabric sculptor Lisa Lichtenfels created 3-D portraits of Barbra Streisand and Demi

makeup artist as well as an actor. Indeed, her portrait pays tribute to "The Man of a Thousand Faces" primarily as a fellow visual artist, showing him seated and holding a make-up brush like a cigar, beside the somewhat gruesome-looking models for two of his characters, propped up on his workbench like severed heads.

Commenting affectionately on the piece in the text of the exhibition catalog, the sculptor evokes something of Norman Rockwell's Americana when she likens the actor to her engineer father, saying, "Both had very rough lives but forged honorable careers. They were both of a certain generation of men ... You don't see faces like

George Segal or Duane Hanson, which gives them a subjective expressive dimension that probes beyond surface appearances. For another, most of her contemporaries use polyurethane, fiberglass, resin and other unyielding materials to create figures they then paint over as a mortician might apply cosmetics to a rigor-mortised corpse, which gives them an embalmed appearance. By contrast, Lichtenfels employs the novel and more malleable medium of nylon stockings, which she wraps around a moveable internal skeleton to give her personages a more supple human quality.

Superimposing several layers of this soft, semitranslucent material (which she



"Check Out" (Diorama)

Moore so eerily lifelike as to quicken the hearts of their most rabid fans, even while displaying all the formal attributes of enduring art. And, thankfully, Lichtenfels' dealer Neil Zukerman, of Chelsea's CFM Gallery, feels no need to resort to such tactics to promote his charge, since Lichtenfels' sculptures succeed splendidly on their own artistic merits.

That Lichtenfels transcends the People magazine mentality of Cattelan and others who pander to the disposable values of celebrity culture is made especially clear in her sculpture "Lon Chaney," depicting the silent screen star whose best known characterization, "The Phantom of the Opera," demonstrated his artistry as a

those any longer."

To a dispassionate observer, however, with his thinning, slicked-back hair and wolfish grin, Chaney could resemble Jack Nicholson playing a period serial killer showing off a couple of his trophies. In any case, much to Lichtenfels' credit, the mood smacks more of "Day of the Locust" than "Entertainment Tonight." For it is this subtle sense of weirdness at the heart of the ordinary that lends her pieces their sharp contemporary "edge."

Then again, several things set Lichtenfels' work apart from that of other hyperrealist sculptors of recent vintage. For one, her figures are created from scratch, rather than cast from living people in the manner of

discovered over twenty-five years ago, while creating figures for stop-motion animation at Disney Studios) enables her to create a subtle range of skin tones that enhance the uncanny realism of her pieces, which range from a mere few inches to life-size.

This is especially striking in full-length nudes such as "Grace," based on one of photographer Eadweard Muybridge's late 19th century motion studies, and "Dual Nudes," where the warmly contrasting skin tones of a blond Venus and her dusky lover make for an engaging erotic frisson.

One of the most ambitious pieces in Lichtenfels' new solo show, however, is "Check Out," a remarkable installation/diorama inspired by an imaginative mental

merger of the young barmaid in Manet's masterpiece "Le Bar aux Folies-Bergères" and a weary check-out girl that the artist observed in a local supermarket. As in the best large scale environmental works of Red Grooms, the action in "Check Out" fans out around this central figure to create a theatrical tableau comprised of diverse types.

Those familiar with Manet's painting, with its elegant nightclub setting of champagne bottles, crystal chandeliers, and sophisticated revelers reflected in shimmering mirrors, will relish the witty transformation Lichtenfels has wrought here, where the stark fluorescence of a tacky modern convenience store replaces that genteel Proustian atmosphere. This banal setting is evoked in minute detail, right down to the subtly altered product labels and the wittily parodistic cover photos on the check-out counter magazine rack.

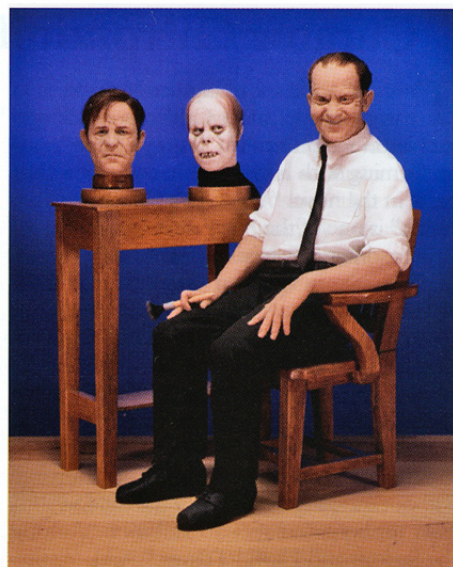
As the sculptor makes clear in her catalog notes, an elaborate narrative scenario, complete with character names, accompanies each of her sculptures, providing a submerged "back-story" that, while tangential to its physical components, enhances its overall verisimilitude.

An especially engaging supporting player in the drama is the character Lichtenfels calls "Estralita," a corpulent hispanic woman in a belly-baring halter and cutoff denim hot-pants. Presumably plugged in via her iPod to hot salsa, she twirls in a swoon with closed eyes, transported by the soaring music, a plastic shopping basket dangling absently off one massive arm. Then there are Russell, an austere white-haired, prune-faced gentleman in professorial tweeds who stands impatiently, pen and checkbook in hand; Martina, a youthful, stylish mom, holding a laden shopping cart while chatting distractedly into a cell phone, and Poly, her cute toddler daughter, who clutches a cellophane-wrapped bouquet plucked from

a nearby display gaudily festooned with festive balloons. Eyes wide with wonder, this radiant child appears to be the only member of the cast fully in touch with the moment.

While playing off each other within the context of the diorama in a manner that brings the venerable yet sorely neglected art of the genre scene right up to the present moment in Malltown U.S.A., each of these highly detailed portraits also stands alone as an autonomous sculptural statement. For it is Lichtenfels' special gift to impart to every figure the vital spark of life that distinguishes the very best realist art.

And it is her ability to ignite this vital spark that makes it possible for her to impart a sense of immediacy to even mythic characters such as "Falling Angel" and "Livia." Perhaps the winged being plunging like Icarus (an



"Lon Chaney"



"Grace"



"Dual Nudes"

effect achieved by balancing the figure on the pedestal by the point of its elbow) gains some of its poignancy from the fact that its face was inspired by a news image the artist once saw of a Bosnian refugee. On the other hand, one might not be eager to meet the model for Livia Drusilla (58 BCE to 29 CE) "the most powerful woman of the early Roman Empire." For here, as Lichtenfels depicts the gowned seated figure, perched like an elderly eagle on one of those little antique Roman benches between classical columns, is a formidable matron indeed. Her gaze, fierce and piercing under bushy white brows that

the sculptor has fashioned thread by minute thread, is captured so compellingly as to leave no doubt as to why she was considered fully as formidable as her husband, Emperor Caesar Augustus.

Whether depicting a native maiden in the Yukon, holding an ice-cream cone; a slender flapper perched on a stool like a coy Art Deco arabesque; or an old-fashioned nightclub cigarette girl with a platinum Harlow bob and short skirt, displaying her tray of Camels, Luckie Strikes, Chesterfields, and Old Golds, Lisa Lichtenfels evokes people of various places and periods with a wit and empathy all but extinct in the art of our century. It is for its humane qualities, as well as its technical proficiency, that her work shows every promise of enduring into an age more aesthetically enlightened than our own.

— Ed McCormack

Lisa Lichtenfels, CFM Gallery, 236 West 27th Street. April 1 - 30.