

ALL DRESSED UP AND SOMEPLACE TO GO

by ACACIA R. WARWICK

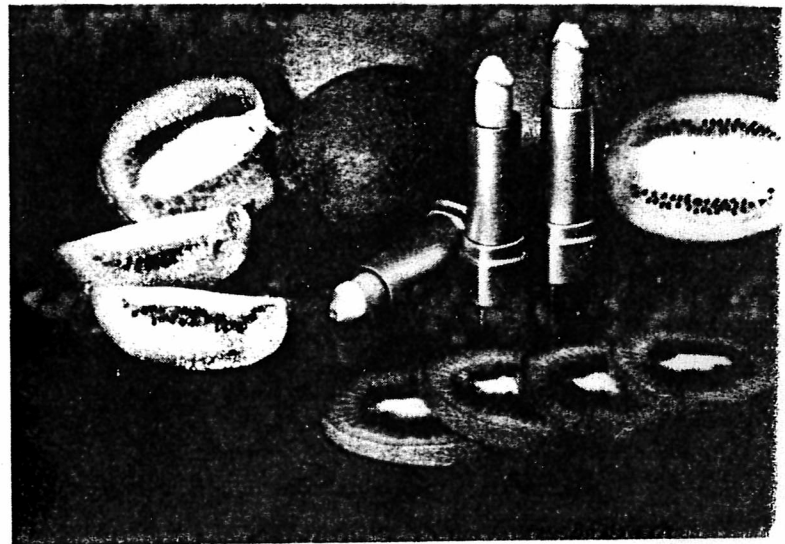
The myth of the artist has led the public to believe that the artist has a "different way of seeing" the world around us and that they use their special vision to create works that are out of the reach of the mere mortal. The question of what is seen and how it is represented has been a battle between the art intelligentsia and the public for over 100 years. But that battle has been fought essentially between men. The female voice had not been heard in the verbal foray around representation until 30 years ago, when it came in loud and strong. What we saw and why we saw it became not only an issue of comprehensibility, but of gender. The traditions of modernist art, laid down by white heterosexual men, began to be questioned and the political implications of art became the primary point of the argument. Women began to storm the citadel of fine art forged by men as the highest form of expression. The "bad boys" of art are now either too old or dead and can no longer contribute to the battle. They have become the icons that feminists are challenging. Our vision of the world is changing and the "bad boys" have been buried. In The show "All Dressed Up and Somewhere To Go," curator Jennie Davis has assembled the works of a few of the "bad girls" who, after paying their respects to the dead, are moving forward to forge their own visions with power, intelligence and humor. These women are Kaucyila Brooke, Mary Beth Heffernan and Liss Platt.

Kaucyila Brooke's contribution to this changing vision is a series of panels entitled "Making the Most of Your Own Backyard." The story behind an ideal beauty. Using a cartoon-like novella format, she creates a story where an unseen narrator, while working to create order in the chaos of her "own backyard," falls into a dream. There she awakens in a garden of perfect order and spies the perfect object of her desire. The narrative is a take-off of medieval

romance poetry, specifically "The Romance of the Rose" by the 12th century poet, Guillaume de Lorris, which is said to be the first romance narrative in Western literature.

Kaucyila Brooke's panels are arranged like a comic book, with photographic images interspersed with text. The effect of her work is almost kaleidoscopic in the imposition of the images of her "own backyard" over and along with the images of the perfect garden. By using the same model for the woman working in her garden and her ideal beauty, she effectively expresses the idea of exchanged or shared reflection between ourselves and nature as well as between the viewer and the ideal. Her work is difficult to penetrate upon first viewing, only because there are so many layers to both the visual images as well as the text. Not only does Brooke question our way of seeing and our standards of traditional beauty, but our reasons for imposing our "order" on nature's chaos, in ourselves and our environment.

From Brooke's kaleidoscopic examination of women, love and beauty we move to Mary Beth Heffernan's funhouse of gender and sexuality. Her gigantic images of nudes, both male and female, are taken from small photographic dolls, by placing herself and her models in traditionally seductive poses and then, after distorting the images by photographing and rephotographing them, she creates fetishistic little cloth dolls out of the final results. At this level, her images seem benign, calling into question our fetishizing processes of representing the human body, particularly the nude, but their size isn't threatening. By photographing the dolls and blowing them up into gigantic, hyperreal proportions, the images become malignant. In them we look at the traditional nude in a funhouse mirror and the figures stare back at us in their deformity and confront us as an affront to traditional representa-



From "Looking Long and Hard," by Liss Platt.

tion of the nude in art.

Where Heffernan takes our ideas of aesthetics and distorts them, Liss Platt makes us question the traditions of representation. The act of representation is an act of power and this power has traditionally been a patriarchal privilege. The implied meaning of this is that one needs to own a penis in order to represent. A dildo is in essence, a representation of a penis. If a penis is required to represent, Liss Platt has as much right as anyone, because her penises are everywhere. A dildo is a penis that is not attached to a body, so can belong to anybody.

In her photos of advertising images,

Platt moves from representation of what one already owns to what one could buy. By combining products that act as obvious phallic substitutes with actual dildos and phallic novelty items, Platt literalizes the idea that the power implied by the penis is what we desire, and in an attempt to satisfy that desire the media offers us substitutes.

The works of all these women take a feminist perspective of privileged roles and gender identity. They show us a new way of looking at something that has been there all the time. Madonna once said, "My cock is in my brain," and according to these "bad girls," that's the only one we need.