

Susie Sexpert's Tireless Little Helpers

'Looking Long and Hard': Photographs by Liss Platt

by JENNIE DAVIS

Not long ago, a review of the work of a feminist painter that appeared in the Calendar section of the *L.A. Times* opened with the assertion that "... woman and the Earth, women with animals or children have long been common themes in art, the female sex bound innately ... with the organic and natural." This view of Woman (as opposed to women) as some sort of essential entity that is more intimately tied to Nature than Man is unfortunately all too pervasive, not to mention attractive; witness the bestseller status of Camille Paglia's (a "reformed" lesbian) *Sexual Personae*, a vitriolic and poorly researched book that manages to be both misogynistic and homophobic within the first five pages. Fortunately, a new brand of feminist and/or lesbian writers and theoreticians, alienated by an essentializing notion of women that is based upon heterosexual oppositions, have challenged the idea that there is an irreducible essence common to all women, an irreducible essence that is defined by what the man is *not*, rather than what the woman is. Woman "bound innately to nature" is nothing new and is most certainly not feminist; throughout history the patriarchal oppression of women has been justified because Woman's "close" relationship to Nature has rendered them slaves to their bodies, unable to function in the masculine world of politics, business and culture. Given this rather depressing situation, what's a girl to do? If that girl is Liss Platt, then the answer is to deny that there is anything essential about gender constructions by making your own penises, or at least photographing them.

The subject of Platt's M.F.A. show "Looking Long and Hard" is the penis, or rather, the symbol of patriarchal power, the phallus. For the photographs that comprise this show, Platt has assembled an unbelievable

collection of dildos, vibrators, plastic cucumbers and penis-shaped novelty items such as a candle, candies and a grow-in-water penis. The show consists mainly of still lives wittily constructed around Platt's phallic substitutes. There are bowls of penises, penis candles surrounded by books and globes, and, in a particularly resonant take-off of San Diego's Sea World Mentality, a nautical still life complete with a slipper-shaped dildo (Susie Sexpert, eat your heart out!). Several of the photographs are of Platt herself, using some particularly formidable dildos to juggle and do magic tricks.

It would be interesting to know what a "critic" such as Paglia would make of Platt's work, given Paglia's essentializing notions about women and their relationship to Nature. Certainly there is nothing "innate" or "natural" about the relationship between Platt and her subject matter. Women do not "go" with penises, in fact, traditional configurations of female desire that appear in the mass media suggest that the penis/phallus is the last thing that women, even heteros, want. Platt's work deconstructs the myth of Woman's "bond" with Nature by suggesting that women can possess their own penis/phallus, thus gaining access to the power that is traditionally denied them. In *Susie Sexpert's Lesbian Sex World*, Susie Bright writes cheerfully that "penises can only be compared to dildos in the sense that they take up space. Aside from difference in shape and feel, the most glaring contrast is that the dildo is at your service; it knows no desire other than your own or your partner's." In a certain sense, Platt's photographs, which after all are not of real penises, reproduce Bright's distinction between a penis and a dildo. Platt's penis-

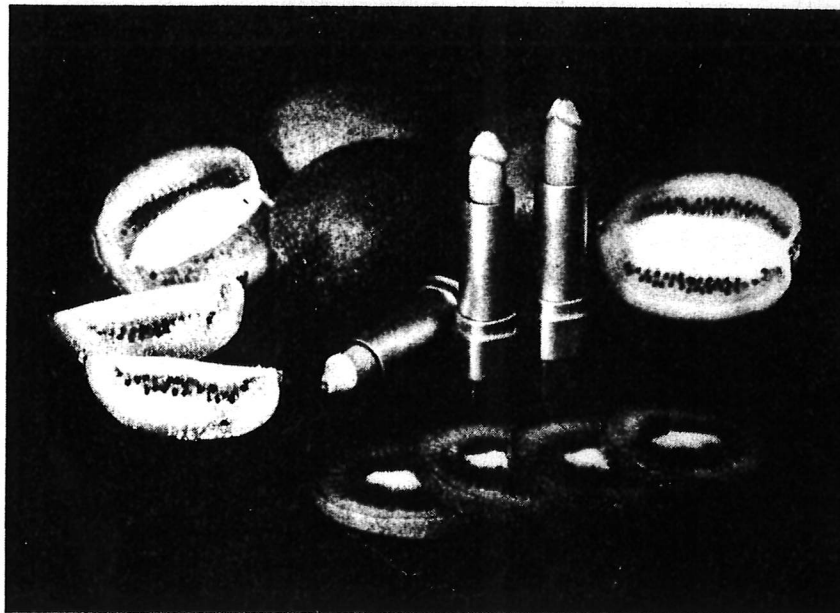
substitutes are at her service; it is Platt who grows her own penis and juggles more than one.

An important component of Platt's work is its high modernist look and feel. Traditional modernist photography, particularly that of photographers such as Lee Friedlander and Edward Weston, has used the objectified nude body of a woman as a foil for aesthetic and formal issues that are the exclusive providence of so-called high art. Modernist photography, in order to signify its fine art status, is executed exclusively in black and white, printed in a large scale format from an oversized negative that gives a high resolution. Technically and aesthetically, Platt's black and white photographs are beyond reproach, executed with a high degree of crafts(wo)manship. In addition to this, "Looking Long and Hard" is dense in art historical references. The first series of still lives are modeled upon 17th century Dutch and Spanish paintings; in fact, one image of vegetables and a cucumber vibrator directly mimics a painting by Cotan that is in the San Diego Museum of Art. The poster-sized images of the growing penis in water that serve to bracket "Looking Long and Hard" resemble the serialized silkscreen art of Andy Warhol, and the images of a juggling Platt are similar to the campy portraits that '60s artists used to advertise their exhibitions.

In spite of their high modernist gloss, Platt's photographs are "not quite right," a mimicry of the real thing that exposes the

ideological cracks and breaks of that which she imitates. Platt's photographs have an excessive, over-ripe quality, as suggested by the Pierre Skira quote on the wall of the gallery that characterizes still lives as "all that can be swallowed, sucked, drunk or chewed." The excessiveness of Platt's photographs, the mimicry which is slightly off, is in fact a deliberate strategy, one that is reminiscent of drag performance. Recently, hot young lesbian theoreticians, following the example of Judith Butler, have advocated drag performance for both men and women as a subversive strategy which simultaneously undermines heterosexual identity while demarginalizing the margins. With drag, one never knows what's what, or who's what, for that matter. Heterosexist categories of gender that place gay sexuality on the margins are exposed for the flawed ideological constructions that they are. It comes as no surprise, then, to discover that Platt is heavily influenced by the writings of Judith Butler. In the best, most subversive and most transgressive sense, "Looking Long and Hard" is a drag performance of modernist photography, a hyperreal mimicry that deconstructs the patriarchal bias of modernist photography and art history, a patriarchal bias that masquerades as universal and ahistorical truth.

"Looking Long and Hard" is on view at the Mandeville Annex Gallery, located on the basement floor of the Mandeville Center at UCSD through June 27, by appointment, (619) 534-2860.



U.S. IMMIGRATION

Business
Real Estate
Personal Injury
Family
Contract
Corporate
Civil Litigation Law

FREE CONSULTATION

INTERNATIONAL LAW ET AL

Emerald Shapery Center
San Diego • Fourth Floor
Phone 595-3107/FAX 595-3108

Offices in London and Los Angeles

Do it right the first time!
Quality work, start to finish, financing available.



KARL NEMESKERI • GENERAL CONTRACTOR

HOME REMODELING • COMPLETE ADDITIONS • BATHS • KITCHENS
GARAGES • PATIOS AND DECKS ...
15 years experience in custom remodeling. Insured and Bonded • License #022155
ARCHITECTURE PLANS AVAILABLE

Call Today (619) 454-3442



20% OFF
FIRST TIME CLIENTS

MASTER HAIRDRESSER

Trained in New York & Europe
Educator Matrix Hair Color
formerly of W. Hollywood,
Beverly Hills, La Jolla

NOW IN MISSION HILLS
DENNIS MARTIN

291-1419
AT THE
HAIREM