Suzannah Sinclair

The Clover Has Three Leaves. 2009, watercolor and pencil on birch panel. 14 x 24".

Suzannah Sinclair's wistful watercolor-and-pencil renderings of the female nude are positioned within a discourse on the construction of desire in a culture organized around the power of the male gaze. Her source material insists on this particular framework: She uses images taken from men's magazines and advertisements dating from the early 1970s, the very era in which feminist critiques of the regime of masculine visual pleasure began to take hold. Seductively sprawled on beds, sofas, and rugs or suggestively propped in lush natural landscapes, Sinclair's sirens assume the familiar poses, props, and color palette of the vintage erotic object. At her recent Samson Projects show, the particular referentiality of these mise-en-scènes was sustained within the gallery itself: The artist installed a selection of furnishings and ornaments evocative of the period, which seem to have migrated straight from the pages of home decor magazines or from the sets of low-budget pornographic films (e.g., a flokati rug, a Harry Bertoia bench, a piece of eroded driftwood, and a potted palm). These objects serve to incorporate the viewer into the performative staging of the moment. The finishing touch was a large mirror, situated between two groups of paintings, in which viewers were presumably invited to contemplate the relations among the act of looking, the condition of selfhood, and the power of representation.

Why would Sinclair so carefully resurrect and activate a moment in the history of feminism that has already been extensively theorized and polemicized by numerous artists and critics? In the aftermath of appropriation art and identity politics, her apparent aim—to coax the viewer into becoming a complicit consumer of ready-made desire while simultaneously revealing the ideological matrices that “construct” this experience—seems dated, if not somewhat pedantic. (Particularly frustrating are the two small seascapes, each the size of a magazine page, which didactically underscore the “romantic” as a fabricated trope exploited by the mass media.)

While it certainly remains crucial to critique the ways in which gender, desire, and power are intermeshed, the most interesting aspects of Sinclair's exhibition are the small flourishes that complicate her historical agenda. For instance, the textures of the birch supports in Easy Living, 2010, and The Clover Has Three Leaves, 2009, embellish the bodies of the female nudes. In the former, a knot in the wood provides a beauty spot on the breast of a voluptuous blond, while in the latter, an expanse of wavy grain echoes the curves of a recumbent brunette's thighs. Here, with the female body literally turned into a “natural” object of desire, one may assume that Sinclair is visualizing (and thus discrediting) the notion of an ingrained or innate form of womanhood. Indeed, unified identity dissolves as the lightly applied watercolor seeps into the wood, blurring the distinction between figure and ground, surface and support. More fascinating, however, is the very slight formal disarray in each work—represented by minute smudges, dabs, and spills that run across the wooden surfaces—which hints at fallibility in Sinclair's painterly gestures. In Making Habits, 2009, and North Country, 2010, for example, the artist uses pencil to carefully outline her subjects' curves but willfully exceeds those graphite boundaries with her paintbrush, subtly disrupting the physical integrity of the subject. In doing so, Sinclair once again challenges the inscription of gender as essentially constituted, but also reveals an interest in considering the contemporary relationship between painting and drawing. Through such tentative explorations of the junctions at which divergent aesthetic concerns overlap with and complicate one another, the artist begins to articulate a personal voice that seems capable of generating libidinal fantasies that are all her own.

If the staging of earlier feminist critiques within contemporary art is not unusual, it appears that Sinclair is still identifying her particular stakes in this operation. Perhaps a first step in this direction is to explore the pleasure she takes in creating images that are complicit with the fabrication of desire.

—Nuit Banai