Bar Room Brawl, 1977



M. Louise Stanley jokingly refers to herself as a "junior high school realist" in an effort to describe her ideosyncratic approach to representational painting. Her description is not as facetious as it might sound. The expressively awkward draftsmanship and compositional tension which animated her junior high school notebooks still characterizes her recent watercolors currently exhibited in MATRIX. Her rambunctious vignettes exist stylistically in an ambiguous area between verismilitude and caricature, urban realism and fantasy.

Stanley's depictions of the world around her may be interpreted in a number of ways. Initially, they offer a satiric representation of the lifestyles, clothing and mannerisms which animate contemporary American culture. Polite Society (1976) is a humorous parody of society's refined and cultivated "in crowd" roughing it in the forest. Fashionably dressed, having drinks and engaging in conversation, the group uses a tree stump as a cocktail table.

Besides operating as satiric barbs, Stanley's works may also be seen as a personal articulation of private feelings and fantasies. The artist freely admits that her images are as much a representation of her own secret fears, ambitions and personality traits as they are of the actions and life situations to which she is an observer. Envy, Sloth and Lust (1977), which depicts three women representing three of the seven deadly sins, is both

a humorous exaggeration of a moral platitude as well as a re-examination of images to which she was attracted as a teenager. In speaking about the work she states, "It was, on one level, an excuse to paint underwear, hose and high heels. In junior high I used to paint rows and rows of brassiers and high heels, and check off the best ones. Also, as a child I had a hatred of toy poodles and poodle knickknacks, so I inserted some of those into the picture too. Secretely I wished (my family) had those kinds of knickknacks." (undated notes by the artist).

The salient characteristic of Stanley's style is her personal approach to representing the human figure. She is less interested in representing how people look in a literal sense than in what their looks express. Her emphatically distorted figurative style, while initially comic in appearance, is an important means of controlling the associative as well as the structural level in her watercolors. Characteristically, the artist's attitudes are articulated through the characters that people her vignettes. She states, "I like to distort people so that they become ideas." (conversation July 10, 1978).

A majority of the figures
Stanley depicts are women.
Long an active feminist,
many of her works obliquely
reflect a politicized consciousness. Mystic Muse and
the Bums Who Sleep on the
Golf Course Behind the Oakland
Cemetery (1978) is an example
of a personal metaphor for
Stanley's feelings of confidence and independence as a
woman dealing with a male-

dominated society. Utilizing a cemetery near her old studio in Oakland as a backdrop, the work depicts a gleaming female nude with grossly distorted anatomical features dancing on the surface of a pond as an audience of lecherous old men look up in awe.

Either through their narrative action, figurative distortion or scale in relation to the overall image, many of the women in Stanley's works have a powerful and assertive appearance, even the ones feigning innocence. Bar Room Brawl (1977) captures two women in a bar in a viscious kicking and hair-pulling match while a group of male pool players look on, immobilized. Stanley states, "I'm interested in aggressive behavior by women, probably because I'm not very aggressive myself. Aggressive actions by women seem so much more threatening than by men." (undated notes by the artist).

Her wry and rambunctious imagery notwithstanding, Stanley is a superb draftsperson who handles the medium of watercolor with considerable skill. Her father, also a fine watercolorist, introduced her to the medium when she was seven years old, and Stanley has continued to work with watercolor since that time. Her mastery of the medium is perhaps most noticeable in the classically smooth wash gradations which are evident in most of her works. In an effort to downplay an obvious skill, she will often juxtapose these elegant washes with a tediously overworked area of opaque color. Along the same lines, she will purposely

place a subtle, low-key color next to an electrifying hot pink or lime green. Her works thrive on the visual tension which is created through these adverse, formal relationships.

Given her iconoclastic approach to representation, it is not surprising that Stanley is inspired by the works of American and European "primitive" painters. What attracts Stanley to these artists is the direct manner in which they responded to their environment. She states "What I envy about the so-called primitive painters is their ability to let something happen with the paint, keeping ideas of 'is it good or is it bad?' out of the process." (conversation, July 10, 1978).

As if for the sake of contradiction, Stanley also utilizes the works of European masters as a source of inspiration. It is possible to see in Stanley's works the influence of Mantegna's perspective distortions as well as the flat iconic forms of Giotto's figures. Also evident in Stanley's works is the simple "pantomime" method of representation so peculiar to medieval painting. When such formal devices are mixed together in a single picture and put to the service of representing images from modern popular culture--daytime TV, urban street life, Seventeen magazine and the "Archie" comics are just a few of the sources which inspire the form and content of Stanley's art-the result is a lively and thoroughly original imagery.

M. Louise Stanley was born in Charleston, West Virginia in 1942. She has attended Scripps College, La Verne College (BA 1964) and the California College of Arts and Crafts (BFA 1967, MFA 1969). Stanley has taught painting and drawing at San Francisco State University and is currently an Assistant Professor of Painting at Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge.

MA

Works in MATRIX:

Polite Society, 1976, water-color, 30" x 40". Lent by the artist.

Hip Hopper, 1977, watercolor, 22" x 30". Lent by the artist.

Bar Room Brawl, 1977, water-color, 22" x 30". Lent by the artist.

Envy, Sloth, Lust, 1977, watercolor, 22" x 30". Lent by the artist.

The Mystic Muse and the Bums Who Sleep on the Golf Course Behind the Oakland Cemetery, 1978, watercolor, 22" x 30". Lent by the artist.

High Fashion, 1978, water-color, 22" x 30". Lent by the artist.

Autobiographical Portrait, 1978, watercolor, 22" x 30". Lent by the artist.

Selected one-person exhibitions:
Women's Inter-Art Center,
NY '78; University of
California, Davis '78.

Selected group exhibitions: California College of Arts and Crafts, Oakland, CA '70; San Francisco Art Institute, Small Objects Show '71; San Francisco Art Institute, Paintings on Paper '71;

Upper Market Street Gallery, SF '72; Capricorn Asunder Gallery, SF '73; Sonoma State College, CA, Women in Love '73; Fresno State College, CA '73; Newport Harbor Art Museum, Newport Beach, CA, Market Street Project '73; Humboldt State University, Arcata, CA, Faculty Show '73; Blanks and Zerzan Gallery, Arcata, CA 74; Evergreen College Gallery, WA '74; Humboldt State University, Arcata, CA '75; Lone Mountain College, SF, Narrative Art '76; Women's Inter-Art Center, NY, Law, Stanley, Riggle-A San Francisco Sampler '76; P.A.C. Gallery, Pasadena, CA, Tattoo 176.

Selected bibliography about Stanley:

Albright, Thomas. "A Show of the Outrageous,"

San Francisco Chronicle (Sept. 27 '72).

Plagens, Peter. "4 Bay Area Painters," Artforum, (June '72).

Loach, Roberta. "Touching All Things," Visual Dialog, Vol. 2, no. 3 ('77).

Paul, April: "Line, Laughter and Lechery: Fundamental Truths in Two Shows," California Aggie (UCD Jan. 25-31 '78).

Brown, Christopher. "Sam Richardson's Reductivism, Louise Stanley's Funk," Artweek, Vol. 9, no. 4 (Jan. 28 '78) p.6.

Selected bibliography by Stanley:

Artpolice Newsletter,
Vol. 1, no. 3 (July '76) p.3.

Arcade: The Comics Revue,
Vol. 1, no. 7 (Fall '76) p.50.

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