Portrait of a Lady for a Contemporary Collection, 1978

A bleached white mink jacket, with the fullness of the latest sleeve, tops the narrow length of a black knife-pleated skirt, sewn at the hip, and horizontally slashed by bright red ribbon. (Unseen is a sheer matching camisole top.) A generous collar of fine cultured pearls encircles the neck. On the wrist rests a bracelet of black enamel on gold in the shape of a pair of panthers gripping a large South Sea pearl and wearing ruby and diamond collars. An open black leather shoe wraps the foot. The hair is loosely tucked and wrapped to frame the face; and the final accents of color are provided by the sculptured nails and the ruby red lips. — Mink jacket by Jean-Paul Avisou for Revillon at Saks Fifth Ave., $3,250. Dress by Albert Nipon, 100% polyester, at I. Magnin, $298. Shoes by Charles Jourdan, $75. The ring is a single large South Sea pearl surrounded by gold with diamonds, $3,725; Gold, pearl, and diamond ear-clips, $450; Bracelet, $3,250; Collar of pearls, about $8,500 — Jewelry, all from Laykin Et Cie at I. Magnin. Pedicure and sculptured nails, by Linda of Hands Up. Hair, by Kevin Dwyer of Larry Coffey Ltd. Make-up, by Juliet.
Concepts of fashion advertising play a critical role in San Francisco artist Dianne Bvell's recent work. For Bvell, fashion advertising represents a form of social history, an art form which can define the aesthetic and ideological positioning of a culture.

In constructing the image Bvell has imitated contemporary fashion advertising with acute precision. Each aspect of the project from her hair styling, makeup and manicure, to the photograph itself is the result of the skills of professionals connected with the fashion industry. Placed within the pages of a contemporary fashion magazine, the work would appear to be simply another fashion layout, set within the context of the University Art Museum's permanent collection, however, it suggests a number of provocative relationships.

Bvell's work bears an oblique relationship to portrait painting. Color photography has essentially replaced painting as the dominant media for recording appearances. As such, Bvell presents us with her notion of the most current form of portraiture, a fashion layout. The female image is, of course, central to fashion advertising and Bvell's enticing eye contact and body posture in the photograph suggest an attitude toward female imagery that typifies the treatment of women throughout the history of painting. Comparing Ingres's alluring Comtesse de Haussonville, 1845, or any recent Vogue advertisement, one message appears consistent: women, above all else, are meant to be attractive and sexually enticing, as much objects of desire as the paintings that record them or the products they advertise. Bvell's "lady" in the context of the Museum's contemporary collection is stylized, refined, extravagantly packaged and processed. She represents the persuasive force of seduction common to both art and media advertising. Unlike Ingres's vivid characterization of his subject, however, Bvell, in keeping with media imagery, presents a portrait devoid of character. A seductive and highly superficial advertising symbol.

The utilization of the female image as subject matter is a typical aspect of Bvell's work. In 1976 Bvell presented Odalisque in cooperation with the Museum of Conceptual Art. An outdoor installation in the heart of the San Francisco strip club district, the work consisted of a photographic image, converted by a commercial outdoor advertising company into an immense 10' x 20' billboard painting. The subject of the image was a reclining female nude, or odalisque, posed in sensuously draped surroundings according to the canons of traditional painting. The face of the model was cropped from the picture, leaving an anonymous female form in a classical pose conspicuously set against the plethora of lurid advertising which decorates the North Beach area.

In 1977 Bvell installed Oasis for a Gallery at the John Berggruen Gallery in San Francisco. The work was a single 16" x 28" color print mounted and brightly illuminated on one wall of the gallery. The subject of the photograph was the artist seated nude astride a camel attended by a bemused camel driver in native robes. The photograph was taken in Morocco. Bvell states she was interested in creating "an analogy between the occurrence of a single image within the austere gallery context and the small fertile area of vegetation or oasis that interrupts the arid expanse of desert." (Undated statement). Bvell used a 1,000 watt quartz spotlight projected through an ellipsoidal lens which was framed onto the photograph in order to effect an intense mirage-like quality that permeated the gallery. She states, "I was interested in creating an environment from a single image." (Undated statement). Further, the paradoxical imagery presented in the photograph—a naked woman posing for a photograph in the context of a country and culture in which women traditionally cover their face and body from public view—drew attention to the cultural contrasts between Western and Middle Eastern countries in regards to the social status and cultural image attached to women.

Dianne Bvell was born in Los Angeles, California in 1943. She has attended the University of California, San Diego, and the San Francisco Art Institute (BFA 1973, MFA 1974). She lives in San Francisco.

MA

Works in MATRIX:

Portrait of a Lady for a Contemporary Collection, 1978, Slide projection, 76" x 61" (installed). Lent by the artist.

Special credits for technical assistance in the production of this work:

Lawrence E. Green - layout design; Romaine Perin - coordination and copywriting; Sharon Grace - video documentation. For their generosity in the loan of clothing, furs and jewelry, we would like to express our appreciation to I. Magnin, Revillon of Saks Fifth Avenue and Laykin Et Cie.
Selected one-person exhibitions:
San Francisco Art Institute, '75; Museum of Conceptual Art, San Francisco '76,
Odalisque, Billboard Installation; John Berggruen Gallery, San Francisco '77.

Selected group exhibitions:
San Francisco Art Institute '73; San Francisco Art Institute, Drawing Invitational, '73;
Oakland Museum of Art, Oakland, CA, Bay Area Artists, '75; Museum of Conceptual Art,
San Francisco '76; CARP, Los Angeles CA, A Tight 13 Minutes, '77.

Selected bibliography by Blell:

Selected bibliography about Blell:
p. 12.
Morch, Alfred. "Desert Song," San Francisco Examiner


MATRIX is supported in part by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, a Federal Agency.