

ESSAY - JOHN ASH

Hedy Klineman's work of the eighties was very much of its time - a time of outsize personalities, overnight success, fashion and routine fabulousness, hence Klineman's affectionately witty "Fashion Portraits", in which art-world figures are quite literally represented by their clothes and other personal impedimenta. These portraits might be viewed as so many variations on Oscar Wilde's dictum: "Only superficial people do not judge by appearances." But, by art-world standards, the eighties moment is long past, and sadly many of its leading personalities (Warhol, Mapplethorpe, Geldzahler -- all friends of Klineman's) have passed with it. Klineman has had the good sense to acknowledge this fact, and has embarked on an exploration of a world that may seem to have little to do with her earlier work.

In her new work, the stress is on formal concision, elegance and luxurious materials (silk and velvet, copper, silver and gold leaf). More importantly, she has abandoned art-world personalities for images of eastern deities - Buddhas, Hindu gods and goddesses. This does not mean that Klineman has suddenly "got religion" in a fit of reaction against eighties excesses. She is neither a Buddhist nor a Hindu, and she has not entirely rejected the recent past. A composition that is made up of twelve brilliantly colored, screen-printed images of the elephant-headed god, Ganesh, for example, is surely, in part, a nostalgic and oddly skewed allusion to Warhol's Maos and Marilyns. (Mao's faces, for that matter, can sometimes look more than a little like a Buddha's). Nevertheless, she has taken a radically different path, not only turning away from the brittle milieu of downtown Manhattan and the Hamptons, but turning to the religious imagery of remote cultures. Of course, syncretisms and cultural borrowings are things that tend to happen as centuries approach their end, but Klineman's commitment to this imagery goes far beyond mere fascination with the exotic. The "Deity Series" is surely the record of a search for something beyond her previous experience and artistic practice, but the goal remains elusive, as perhaps it should. Art, after all, is a matter of quests and questions, not destinations and answers. Dogma is not at issue here, but ideas of grace and spiritual repose most certainly are.

Klineman's change of direction is not as arbitrary or unprepared as it might seem. About twenty years ago she bought a small, stone head of Kwan Yin, the Chinese goddess of fortune, and kept it in her bedroom. As the eighties came to their nearly calamitous close, she found herself increasingly drawn to this head. And, no wonder - it is an image that is both charming and enigmatic. Kwan Yin's small mouth wears a serene half-smile; her nose is long and graceful; her exaggeratedly slanted eyes are half-closed, and, on top of her severely elegant coiffure, what appears at first to be a fashionable aigrette, turns out to be a plump, miniature Buddha with hand raised in blessing. Kwan Yin looks both soignée and far removed from worldly concerns. She is dreaming or lost in contemplation of something we can only guess at. Whatever her secret might be - and she surely has one - it is closed behind her smile.

Klineman began by simply screen-printing Kwan Yin's image, sometimes singly, but more often in groups of four or six (repetitions she has compared to the repetitions of a mantra). She next prepared the ground for the image with areas of gold and silver arranged abstractly like broad brush strokes, which is to say, the gold and silver impinge on the image, but do not in anyway delineate it. It is this fusion of sophisticated, western techniques with ancient, East Asian imagery that lends the new work much of its fascination, and yet Klineman's use of precious metals would strike a Buddhist as entirely traditional. One of the images that next attracted her was a Burmese reclining Buddha, and in Burma the application of gold leaf to a pagoda or statue is a popular act of piety: the great Shwedagon pagoda in Yangon, for example, is covered with an estimated 120,000 pounds of gold leaf.

As Klineman pursued her eastward direction she came upon images that she found hard to encompass, since they had little to do with western ideas of beauty or spirituality. Herein lies a paradox, for the earliest images of the Buddha were deeply influenced by classical, Greek iconography. As imagined by sculptors trained in the Hellenistic traditions of Bactria and northwest India, the enlightened Prince Gautama is essentially Apollo with a top-knot, but in later incarnations he acquired a double chin and multiple arms. Ganesh, with his elephant head, was even more problematic, but a visit to India helped her to come to terms with this imagery. Seen in his natural habitat Ganesh made perfect sense, and Klineman brought some of this context back home with her, framing hectically colored Ganeshes with votive tassels and bands of red and gold embroidery. But it is the most restrained Ganeshes that are the handsomest: high-lighted by gold and silver, black has rarely appeared so sumptuous.

Klineman's freely syncretic approach to religious imagery is best exemplified by a series of plexi-glass boxes that bring together many of her favorite motifs. Printed on the sides of the boxes the images inevitably overlap, so that we see Kwan Yin's face through a seated Buddha, and a dancing Shiva through a standing Lakshmi. They are doubtless intended as objects of aesthetic contemplation rather than religious devotion, yet they have something of the quality of modernist reliquaries.

In her most recent work Klineman has turned from screen-printing to painting. The paintings draw on the same general vocabulary of imagery, but much more indirectly and ambiguously, in a nearly Symbolist manner. Gold leaf is mixed in and the boldly handled paint extends over ornate, antique frames. In one a broad face with heavy-lidded eyes, that looks halfway between a Buddha and a Redon Orpheus, appears to be crowned with fruit or flowers, and is almost submerged in the vigorous play of brush strokes and gilding. The element of abstraction that was implicit in many of the screen-prints is now emerging more clearly. These relatively small images also exude a powerful sensuality out of all proportion to their size. Klineman's "spiritual path" (as she likes to call it) is evidently not a path of retreat or negation. An image of two dancing figures, who may or may not be related to Shiva and Lakshmi, is saturated in coppers and magentas, picked out with strokes of green and orange. The dancers seem about to dance out of their frame. Work of such freshness and vivacity is all too rare in the jaded and increasingly mean spirited nineties. Here, spiritual aspiration is joined to a frank celebration of earthly delights.

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