

ESSAY - RONNIE COHEN

Meaning is, for Hedy Klineman, the earmark of culture. In being so vivid a reflection of so primary a relationship, the work of this New York painter serves up a veritable wellspring for anyone interested in gaining richer understanding of the fundamental issues she is so amply want to treat. From abstract impulses to material drives to spiritual yearnings, Klineman is amazingly deliberate and discerning in her sophisticated accounting of them. She demonstrates how in our need to make connections, locate associations and establish identities, in the desires and fantasies this releases, there operates a dynamic agency for change and conferring value. As for how all this functions, we have only to turn to Klineman's life-long involvement with art. Merging deep-seated concerns with subject and form, her art is revealing of the impressively rich development that has followed from the independent and liberated outlook she has been intensely committed to since early childhood.

Aptly describable, it seems, by the phrase "born artist", Klineman, who was raised in Brooklyn, already was by her teenage years well along with painting and drawing. She attended two progressive art programs, the first at a private day school near her home where Klineman recalled teachers encouraging her to be bold and resourceful about making things including stage sets, and then at the Brooklyn Museum School, a magnet for young serious art students that was extremely hard to get into when Klineman attended during the 1950s. The spirit of discovery fostered by her nascent brush with art proved to have been eminently suitable preparation for dealing with the patently experimental syllabus at Cooper Union she encouraged in the early 1960s.

For Klineman: "Cooper Union was about freedom, the freedom to always create something different and new, and to recreate". While at Cooper Union she drew from the figure and took courses in sculpture, architecture and calligraphy and became absorbed with painting. The enormous challenge she found in facing a blank canvas and filling it up with shapes, which continues for her even today, has sources in the strong appreciation of Abstract Expressionism that was a feature of her Cooper Union years. Predicated on her admiration of their bold and gestural strokes and energetic treatment of colors, her liking of Willem de Kooning and Franz Kline constitute yet another link between the 1960s and 1990s. Klineman is continuing to explore these features in recent paintings of divine subjects.

After leaving Cooper Union, Klineman during the 1970s moved away from making references to the figure to exploring within the abstract framework of color field painting themes of landscape and ocean. In finding out what acrylic, which was still rather new in the 1970s, would do, she gave vent to experimental inclinations, that would broaden the scope of her investigation of surface in painting. In getting one color down, and another, she made the surface indivisible from its layers. Working with veils of color and acrylic gels, she was intrigued by the properties of image and object she could make the surface take on. By the late 1970s, Klineman having opted to develop its physical aspect began painting on different surfaces starting with antique damask tablecloths. Next she painted on an Yves Saint Laurent scarf she owned. Staying with her surroundings she went into the closet and came out with items she planned to paint on. They were "all treasures", as she had dubbed them, like the red Courreges mini dress and jacket that had been brought back from Paris in 1965.

In 1981 she painted on the Courreges outfit and put it on a white canvas. This icon of 1960s fashion and revolutionary statement of geometric simplicity in haute couture design assumed a new role in one of the self portraits belonging to the series of collage and mixed media paintings known as the Fashion Portraits. An extension of Klineman's adventurous sensibility, the Fashion Portraits were a new vehicle for exploring the relationship of art and reality. Just as she had done in the self portraits, she worked with clothing articles and objects given her which held special meaning for her portrait subjects. Andy Warhol gave his glasses; Julian Schnabel the clothes he painted in; Michael Jackson black suede boots worn in the "Bad" video. The Fashion Portraits offer fascinating documentation of the art, fashion and entertainment who's who of the 1980s, and in the startling juxtapositions of abstract and recognizable elements these paintings body forth the sharp energy of the stars and first-rank achievers that made the decade's culture go.

For Klineman, the Fashion Portraits also presented a welcome opportunity to develop the possibilities of collage. Her interest in the expressive potential of collage found a fitting showcase in the paintings inspired by the 1988 auction of Andy Warhol's estate at Sotheby's. From paraphernalia belonging to Klineman's own experience of this event, her bidding paddle, jewelry she bought, tags from the sale, Klineman incisively captured what exactly made the Warhol auction an event of such massive proportions. Having in the Fashion Portraits done the ultimate in a sense, in terms of providing a running, telling commentary on fame and money, the main organs for self-validation in the 1980s, Klineman decided toward the end of the decade not to do more. Her turning to inward concerns was prescient indeed given the new respectful attention that is being accorded matters of the psyche and spirit in 1990s culture.

"If the 1980s were all about going out there, the 1990s are about going inside", observes Klineman, who entered into serious studies of meditation and yoga. In her work this shift is indicated in the series of Chakra paintings done at the end of the 1980s and beginning in the 1990s. Their tactile qualities enhanced by her covering of canvases with gauze, these paintings with rich surfaces and the vibrant colors that Klineman has a knack for obtaining from acrylics, made for swirling compositions evoking the special energy points in the body that are the Chakras. After the Chakra paintings she began opening up further this new thematic threshold and looking to her surroundings and experiences for subjects that would be satisfactorily in tune with growing interests of hers in East Asian philosophies of spiritual enlightenment and physical well-being. Appropriately, the first representation of a Buddhist deity was based on a head of Kwan Yin she had at home for years and only at this stage was ready to see and interpret in new terms. In keeping with the synergistic ways in which change and continuity have functioned during her career, she decided to do a silkscreen of Kwan Yin. Silkscreen had been used in the Andy Warhol Auction series paintings. It was of course Warhol's medium of choice. And like Warhol, Klineman is very much involved in making it her own. "To me silkscreen was another textured surface," she says and has treated it accordingly. Klineman having mastered the process, prefers to print silkscreens herself. Not only has she been experimental about combining silkscreen with over painting, under painting and embossing, she's been noticeably inventive about the surfaces she will print on. They include canvas different

colored and textured papers, fabric and wood and plexiglass boxes. Just as with silkscreen, whether a subject is Kwan Yin, a Chinese goddess, a Japanese Buddha or Ganesh, the Indian divinity with an elephant head and human body she got to know during a 1994 trip to that country, Klineman is manifestly making her own these images of deities belonging to Buddhist and Hindu influenced cultures. In the black-ground compositions scale and contrast imbue Ganesh's images with a majesty that is in harmony with the power to remove obstacles for which he is traditionally worshiped. In the plexiglass boxes transparent and luminous surfaces endow screened images with an appearance of having just materialized, their seeming airiness part of the magical glow, a celestial quality befitting heavenly representations. In the paintings, Klineman's sweepingly sensual and deftly tactile touch conjures up the mystical energies of the deities. Stressing color and gestural movement, these painterly depictions flowing over into the frames and further adorned with tassels of a type used for adornment in India and very differently here, are striking examples of Klineman's unerring talent for blending traditional and contemporary elements into visual poetry.

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