



Trio, 2006. Oil and acrylic on canvas, each panel 76 x 38cm. Photograph: Tim Gresham. Courtesy the artist.

THE ELUSIVE FEMININE:

WORKS BY DEBORAH KLEIN

INGA WALTON

For over twenty years Deborah Klein's artwork has been governed by the exploration of feminine personæ and shifting identities across various social, cultural, and historical contexts. Her practice includes drawing, printmaking and painting, characterised by intensive research, immersion in period details, and a certain nostalgia. The recent touring survey exhibition 'Out of the Past, 1995-2007', curated by Diane Soumilas, drew on Klein's intriguing catalogue of female archetypes. The exhibition borrowed its title from the 1947 Jacques Tourneur film, reflecting Klein's abiding interest in cinema, particularly the glamorous anti-heroines as portrayed by actresses like Barbara Stanwyck, Jane Greer, and Rita Hayworth. Klein's 'Film Noir' series (1995-96) skillfully integrates the classic hard-edged black-and-white filmic sensibility into punchy graphic linocuts. Klein's roster of amoral *femmes fatales* inhabit a bleak nocturnal landscape of flickering street lights and treachery, with the odd splash of hand-coloured carnal red to denote their disappointment.

Klein's protagonists are anonymous, unknowable, and sometimes latently threatening creatures, whose motivations are never elucidated. She often obscures the features of her subjects, superimposing tattoos, lace, and petit-point onto them like camouflage. Sometimes their faces are abbreviated altogether, as with the artist's 'Torso' works (2002-03), where close-fitting evening gowns and lace wraps are worn by ostensibly headless models. Costume and ornamentation is both an armour and a means of concealment: artistically Klein relishes the technical difficulties presented by this penchant for the dramatic. She also pays tribute to the 'genteel' or 'domestic' arts—socially approved areas of women's creativity and industry—with references to needlework, embroidery, quilting, crocheting, and dress-making. Klein's Silk Cut Award winning piece, *The Lair of the Lyrebird* (1997), was an adventurous and multi-layered murgence of linocut, interfacing, and hand-stitching. More recently, Klein had the opportunity to collaborate with the Victorian Tapestry Workshop, and weavers Rebecca Moulton and Cheryl Thornton, in the transfer of two of her designs into woven panels as part of the commissioned 'Eight Women Series' (2007).

Klein's artistic *œuvre* moves seamlessly between large-scale paintings and works on paper to smaller, intimate panels derived variously from Elizabethan and Stuart portrait miniatures, connoisseur's cabinets, reliquaries, and Victorian mourning jewellery. Klein has described one consistent aspect within her work as 'looking over the overlooked'. 'Private Collection' (2000), an exhibition of inter-related oval, circular and rectangular works, skillfully combined Klein's interest in the power of adornment and symbolism with the legacy of meticulous and finely wrought textiles. Our fascination with keepsakes, family heirlooms, vintage clothing, and the tangible evidence of the past draws us to Klein's expressive recreations. For all the self-evident beauty of her work, Klein's underlying preoccupation is undoubtedly the manner in which women have been consistently reduced to their surface value as

decorative vessels, and how that (limited) function is prescribed and rigorously scrutinised by the male gaze.

The exhibition 'Tease' (2004) was devoted to the seductive and erotic possibilities of female hair. As a perennial source of allurements and anxiety to men, the hair, much like the woman who grows it, must be tamed. In these 'rear view' studies no identifying features compete with the elaborate coiffures, just a hint of forehead, a side of jaw-line, or the exposed nape of the neck. Barely a wisp or tendril escapes the constrained and convoluted up-dos, which are certainly expressive; their message, however, is decidedly ambiguous. To achieve such an extravagant style suggests long periods of patient stillness at the hands of a hairdresser, to maintain it requires inhibited movement and self-conscious deportment. In short, enough to make Rapunzel very cross. Within Klein's harem of glossy strands the voyeurism implied by this spectacle goes unfulfilled. We are invited to observe but cannot engage with these partially seen figures, whose presence is tantalising but insubstantial.

Traditionally women have been regarded as mobile ornaments for conveying the wealth and status of their families or husbands. Tiaras and diadems are worn by royal and aristocratic women as symbols of rank in Western countries, just as costly hair ornaments were by ladies in Eastern courts. Klein has devoted many works to ostentatious lacquered hair accessories, in bold red or blue, their teeth adding a malevolent edge amidst the twisting tresses and braids. She was particularly interested by the decorative combs ('kushi') and hairpins ('kanzashi') integral to Japanese fashion during the Edo period (1603-1868), and still worn by maiko and geisha as a prominent part of their formal toilette. The 'Forget Me Knots' series (2007) took the elements of this theme to the point of abstraction. The arrangement of coils suggest both containment and defensiveness; the oversize comb provides the only hint of the wearer's preferences or personality as their head and neck are absent altogether. This 'performance' of femininity, with its emphasis on appearance and outward conformity, gives little or no consideration to any interior life a woman may have, or seek to cultivate.

Klein's latest body of work, 'Moth Masks' (2007-08), takes its inspiration from the A.S. Byatt novella *Morpho Eugenia* (1993), and the artist's detailed study of butterflies and moths from the Indo-Australasian region. Included in the exhibition 'The Enchanted Forest: New Gothic Storytellers', curated by Jazmina Cininas, Klein turns her subjects to 'face' us once more, but covers them with opulent winged masks. The wider narrative possibilities contained in folk/fairytales, and children's stories allowed Klein to consider the manner in which the conventions, stereotypes, and contradictions inherent to the female state seem to be inculcated



left to right: *Untitled (Red Gown)*, 2003. Oil pastel on paper, 75 x 55cm; *Vorticist*, 2004. Oil & acrylic on linen, 122 x 91cm. Photograph Tim Gresham. Courtesy the artist.

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from girlhood. Although they stare at us impassively and perhaps invite contact, these figures are untouchable, like fragile pinned specimens sealed behind display glass. The gaudy colours of the masks, associated with Carnevale, role-play, transformation, and giddy escapism only serve to emphasise the immobility and entrapment of the wearers. These women are reduced to static objects, to be coveted and displayed, but never handled. If not visually, certainly metaphorically, they have been netted, and their wings clipped. Klein confronts us with the reality of the way women are still collected, assessed, and 'catalogued' according to genus, type, ethnicity, observable behaviour, and indeed, expected sexual trajectory.

Klein's enigmatic protagonists serve as foils, or mutable representations. They remind us, often uncomfortably, of the boundaries of 'appropriateness' by which women are judged, of what is coded, sanctioned, and tolerated. The beauty and blank perfection of these characters is intentionally unsettling, as Klein probes the extent to which the viewer challenges or accepts the boundaries of their own restrictions, however subtle or perceived. These figures contain within them a resonance of the past, and the threads of possibility, since we can project onto them whatever scenario suits us. The woman in a Deborah Klein work departs in a rustle of stiff fabric, and without a backwards glance; you will feel it when she leaves, but you will wish she had lingered. ■

Deborah Klein works from her Melbourne studio, and lectures at RMIT (Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology). For more on the artist see: www.deborahklein.net. Inga Walton is a writer and arts consultant based in Melbourne.

The Enchanted Forest: New Gothic Storytellers has been shown or will show at Geelong Gallery (12 April-9 June, 2008), Bendigo Art Gallery (19 July-17 August, 2008), Shepparton Art Gallery (10 October-23 November, 2008), Latrobe Regional Gallery (21 February-19 April, 2009), Swan Hill Regional Art Gallery (1 May-15 June, 2009), Dubbo Regional Gallery (4 July-13 September, 2009, and Tweed River Art Gallery (1 October-15 November, 2009).