

Review of Exhibitions

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Colette at Daniel Newburg

Colette is an original. Her subject matter—the archeology of female self-images, the role of artifice in sexual transactions, the intertwining of power and passivity in female archetypes—anticipated the preoccupations of artists like Cindy Sherman and Laurie Simmons by at least 10 years. The heterogeneous mix of sculpture, installations, books, assemblage, pictures and costumes in this show offered an opportunity to survey Colette's recent work, including some done in Berlin, her home for the

last two years. She appears to be turning her attention from her bizarre and poignant installations to more traditional forms related to painting and sculpture. This transition hasn't been entirely painless, but several promising directions have emerged.

First the problems: six headless female figures made of resin-soaked cloth kicked off the show in the front room. Not only were they seven feet tall and streaked with lurid color, but, lest you fail to notice them, they were also lit from within. This gaudy, morbid gathering created quite an effect in the dimly lit gallery—something like a sorority party for Edgar Allan Poe heroines.

As spectacle, the piece was effective; as sculpture, less so. In a theatrical set a gestalt is created by various elements, none of which is intended to be examined too closely. Sculpture, on the other hand, demands more careful articulation of individual forms. These headless women, invoking as



Colette: *From Silk to Marble*, 1985, performance documentation; at Daniel Newburg.

they did the very paradigms of articulated classical form (with titles like *Venus* and *Winged Victory*), were too casually made to fulfill the kind of expectations they aroused. Many of the collages, altered photographs, black-light paintings and other pictorial constructions were vulnerable to a similar criticism. Their identities hovered uneasily—were they props, mementos of installations, or paintings?

Another part of the show was frankly theatrical: Colette's set and costumes, documented in photographs, for a production of Ravel's *L'Heure Espagnole* at the Berlin Opera in May '85. Colette covered the entire set as well as the singers with her familiar bunched and scalloped fabric, adapting it ingeniously to emphasize the identity of each character. The result seemed both carefully considered and highly effective. Here, by making the theatrical paramount, she found an excellent vehicle for her hybrid sculpture.

At the other extreme (from the point of format) was a little book published in 1985 called *From Silk to Marble*, which pointed toward a successful resolution of her pictorial ambitions. In each of 26 black-and-white photographs, using only a sheet (and now and then a rose), Colette at once alluded

to and commented on various periods in the history of fashion from Egypt to Napoleonic France. In these pictures fashion connoted a variety of attitudes from the esthetic to the sexual to the political. She conducted us on this historical tour simply by combining the inventive draping of her sheet with her evocative gestures. Along with the sets for the Berlin Opera production, *From Silk to Marble* allowed Colette's unique combination of social observation, eroticism and humor its clearest expression.

—Stephen Ellis

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