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## Sight Unseen: The Collages of Mignon Harkrader

by John Ewing

"The relation between what we see and what we know is never settled," writes John Berger in his book *Ways of Seeing*. In the empirical world, this problem of perception is often explained to the senses scientifically, as in heat waves rising off asphalt. However, in culture the senses have a harder time negotiating the difference. Cinema overcomes this conflict between what we see and know by engaging us in a narrative that "suspends disbelief." In painting, if the gap is wide enough, we call it "trompe l'oeil." The intention is to delight by playfully deceiving one's sense of sight and "suspending" the mind's understanding of space. The effect is decorative, the ruse good-natured.

But what about our understanding of art? If our eyes and intellect are so easily manipulated, what then is the intention of the artist? What informs her choices? To what does she appeal: the mind, the senses, the lexicon of images internalized in each of us? Let us consider two works by Mignon Harkrader included in the Artist's Gallery (AVIART) November exhibition "Paper" and ask ourselves to what extent this artist directs our experience of her work. How do her "collages" bridge the gap between what we see and know, and what do they communicate in the process?

Let us begin with the choice of materials. This is our first encounter with the artist's work, our sensual perception of the media which give a form to her imagination. Fabric scraps, lace and fringe, oils and printed text on paper — these are the materials Ms. Harkrader has cho-

sen. We immediately recognize textures and patterns and begin attaching meanings to them. The materials gather associations, those we supply and others generated by the work's construction.

Harkrader's piece titled "There is No Better Place to Relax" manages to engage and confound at once. At a cursory glance, the large collage appears to be constructed on an elaborate floral-patterned bed spread with red fringe, but a closer look reveals only the left half to be the bed spread and the right half a scrap of distressed fabric. The suture is masked by a painterly attempt to reconstitute the floral pattern onto the distressed right half.

This ironic "base" sets the stage for the images painted on the surface. Two central figures struggle in vain to assert an interpretation of the work's title. In ivory and aquamarine oils, the upper figure is painted in broad strokes to resemble an aging photograph. This figure, cropped at the shoulders and knees, stoops with a pesticide duster over a bed of tall, indistinct flowers.

Below him is a crisp, faithful reproduction of Restoration portraiture. Although aristocratic, this figure is also subject to the scrappy discord inherent in the collage. Cropped at the shoulders and knees, the posed figure is disassembled, the torso forced into a reclining position and the elegantly shod feet abandoned across the piece. Both figures overlap an obscured portion of text entitled "Biology and Its Makers." What is Ms. Harkrader saying to us? Does she reveal a destabilizing force beyond the security of both science and privilege? Is there, then, "no better place to relax" than where our circumstances locate us, regardless of period or place in society?

Her piece titled "Milk," harmonious and personal in tone, is less didactic but no less complex. There are many pieces, many layers, but no competing swaths of fabric. The layered

materials and the resultant layering of meanings evoke that other definition of medium as spiritual messenger. This piece is not an exposé but, rather, an incantation. It is conjured not to bewitch but to record with a swirl of associations across time, image and text, not unlike a CD-ROM which layers sounds, images and words to capture the essence of an idea.

As in the previous piece, "Milk" is constructed with fabric and printed text and painted over with oils. The images, however, do not remain static. They appear to rise and sink, merging and melding on a liquid surface like the floating figures in Chagall's memory-scapes. There is a nude form to the side with indistinct lines that only hint at gender. Merging into it is the central scene, a still life with birds, bowl and hands. The dead birds are carefully dressed and placed, as are the hands which dip a cloth into the bowl. There is a graceful power present in the still life, a confident preparation. Above the hands is an elongated female figure stenciled in red. She illustrates an idealized housewife from the 1950's and is headless, like the paper-doll outfits once cut from McCall's magazine.

Much of the printed text is visible through the still life. There are references to milk: "Milk as a Natural Food, Rest and Milk Diet, Modifying Milk Diet." The text contains drawings and charts with numeric figures. What does this mean in the context of the painted images? What is Ms. Harkrader saying to us? Taken individually, we see references to femaleness, femininity, nutrition, and the domestic arts, but a synthesis of these associations is clearly the objective. Like Eisenstein's dialectical montage, our encounter with the piece must creatively merge the disparate elements, this synthesis occurring in our imagination.

"We only see what we look at," writes John Berger in Ways of Seeing. "To look is an act of choice. As a result of this act, what we see is

brought within our reach ..." If that is true, it also follows that our understanding of the art we see, the art we choose to look at, begins by the choices made by art makers themselves. Ms. Harkrader recognizes the power of images to transmit meaning. Her collages force richly-associative symbols into a dynamic mix, compelling us to reach with more than just our sense of sight to find it.



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