CONTEMPORARY ART

A la mode
Is artist's feminism old hat?

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FOR THE CALGARY HERALD

H.G. Wells perhaps said it best, “The highly fashionable and the absolutely vulgar are but two faces of the common coin of humanity, struck millions at a time.”

It’s a coin we constantly flip. We pick up magazines and thumb through the pages. We scan fashion advertisements and visually consume the clothing and its wearers, mostly female.

And if, by some superhuman effort, we momentarily shake our eyes from such pervasive, and perverse, presentations, then award-show pundits redirect our visual duty back onto who wore what, who revealed what, who was best- and worst-dressed.

Gently reacting to this revolving door of fashion’s presentation and consumption is Toronto artist, Cathy Daley, whose newest works are on view at Newzones.

In these untitled drawings, black silhouettes depict women from the waistline down.

Cathy Daley’s Untitled 531, 2007 Mixed Media on Vellum.

REVIEW
Cathy Daley, new work, at Newzones Gallery through April 7.

Dresses, legs, and feet fly in all directions. But not all drawings are alike.

SEE DALEY, PAGE C2
FROM CI DALEY

Daley's strongest works are the 21 grid-arranged smaller works. On these, Daley brushees, drape and smears oil pastel across smooth vellum to create an exquisite range of apparel-like forms.

Inky swirls suggest a cloud of crinoline, staccato marks reference an ostrich feather dress, a slick film forms a satin gown, wash and sediment imitate a sheer, patterned teddy. Colourful collaged legs provide the accents, jutting from the dresses and terminating in stiletto heels. The combination is a bold burlesque (perhaps even a thrilling moment for the foot fetishist.)

There is pleasure to be found in the way Daley grasps the vulgarity of the fetish surrounding women's fashion and turns it into visual motif.

In 1995 Daley abruptly zoomed in on the legs and tutu of a female figure (another untitled work). The form continues to be dominant in her oeuvre. It recalls most directly the 1939 Andre Kertesz photograph of the same truncated subject, which was discussed as a passive object for the male gaze in the now classic essay, "Women, Art, and Power" by Linda Nochlin.

Daley's art can be pursued from this viewpoint, as the glossy black foam on an ocean of feminist theory. Today, though, simplistically identifying her work as a feminist critique is both outdated and denying a North American cultural shift.

Girl Power has become a multibillion-dollar industry where consumption creates identity. This generation of young women enjoys gains made by early political actions, such as more equal pay and access to jobs, but it seems disinterested in continuing the struggle. It actively seeks frivolity with full knowledge that clothing functions as a code for class, privilege, and social visibility in a patriarchal world. There's no post-feminist ambivalence here. Not only do these women embrace the idea, they seem to think it's part of the 21st Century female DNA.

This deep cultural transformation defangs much of the power of Daley's possible critique. An example, for the first time in 15 years a face appears in one drawing. Here the model more actively states her awareness of the viewer. She seems to say, "While you cannot consume me, you can consume my dress, provided you have the money." The statement is less than piercing.

Daley's drawings ultimately define a space similar to that of Robert Longo's late '70s and '80s black-and-white drawings of gyrating yuppies — in which women also wear black dresses and stiletto heels. Both artists seem to reflect an era more than they critique it. And because of this their drawings share an odd vacuousness.

Yet, as they say in the fashion world: "plus ca change, plus c'est la meme chose." Award shows continue to stage women in the latest getups. Magazines continue to present women as barely more than sexy soccer moms ecstatic over Scrubbing Bubbles. Madison Avenue doesn't tamper with the near perfect recipe of seduction promoting consumption. And Daley doesn't appear to be in any rush to tamper with her tried and true response to their images.

So ultimately we are left with the simultaneously beautiful and vulgar with her quirky reflection of the fashionable and the fashion able. For Daley, black continues to be the new black and the little black dress does exactly what it always did.

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