TORONTO

Cathy Daley

In the early '90s, Toronto-based Cathy Daley produced two related bodies of work, both somber in tone: densely rendered lifesized drawings of self-absorbed, reclining female nudes, and small blue-toned paintings of women dressing and undressing in dim interiors. Both continued her exploration of female identity in terms of cultural definitions and personal experience, and addressed issues of voyeurism and vulnerability, privacy and exposure. In an exuberant new series of untitled large drawings, Daley extends her focus to quintessentially feminine gowns of the sort seen in old Hollywood movies and high-fashion magazines. Richly rendered in black oil pastel on vellum, the ruffled and cinched dresses (with emphasis on the skirts) appear elegant, witty and spirited. Cropped by the paper's edge or ending just short of it, they strut and swirl, their forms animated by the artist's execution and by implied human presence.

Although black dresses on white grounds might initially read as silhouettes, gestural and directional strokes provide internal definition as well as expression and strength. Daley has long worked in oil pastel, and these drawings constitute a virtuoso performance. Pigment is thick or thin, evenly brushed or scumbled. Short staccato marks and long sweeping or looping gestures round the forms; painterliness is enhanced by drips, splatters, smudges and fingerprints.

Daley discovers in the gowns allusions to elemental forces that symbolize womanhood. One drawing presents an evening frock with a plumed bodice, narrow waist, rounded swell at belly and hips; the skirt is severely tapered along the thighs and flares out above the ankles. This elegant shape resembles a ewer (recalling the notion of woman as vessel) and is also suggestive of a palm tree. Other works feature hurricane-swept skirts that seem to manifest a turbulent female sexuality. In one, a tiny bodice floats above the billows of a skirt like a boat on a storm-tossed sea. Thus Daley inventively recasts old stereotypes, discovering an earth mother (a goddess of flora, wind and water) in high-fashion garb.

These drawings reflect a contemporary, post-feminist ambivalence toward fashion, critiquing the garment industry's wrapped-and-bound feminine ideal and the notion of woman as spectacle. But irony in Daley's cultural criticism is the source of much of the drawings' wit. While recognizing the limitations imposed by old ideals, she also acknowledges their grace and appeal and expresses a certain nostalgia and yearning. The gowns lead us back not just to old movies but to childhood memories of mother dressed in fancy clothes for an evening out: a rustle of skirts, a waft of perfume, a final embrace, and she's gone. —Roni Feinstein

Cathy Daley: *Untitled (Dress)*, 1995, oil pastel on vellum, 42 by 94 inches