ARTIST TRANSFORMS ICONS OF STYLE

Little black dress seen in new light

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Cathy Daley is an expert when it comes to the little black dress. For nearly 50 years, the Toronto-based Daley has rendered its form in drawings, as sculpture, and in video. Her little black dresses have been the star in exhibitions across Canada and worldwide and even have a place in the National Gallery of Canada’s contemporary art collection.

It is easy, of course, to understand her fascination with this seemingly straightforward cultural phenomenon. After all, the little black dress bears the undisputed stamp of sophistication, confidence and sex appeal. Just ask any Bridget Jones connoisseur, who didn’t watch gleefully as the film icon skimmed around the screen in a tight black dress, cheeky boots, and secret weapon underwear in her bid for Mr. Right (or in Bridget’s case, Mr. Naughty but entirely Mr. Irresistible)?

We collectively knew that, with that little black dress, Bridget was armed with an innate and unstoppable feminine power.

There is, however, more to this phenomenon than sexy and a handbag. Showing at the Newzones Gallery through April 2 is Daley’s latest incursion into the complex world of the iconic black dress. Drawing from the world of high fashion and our fascination with vintage Hollywood sex symbols, Daley’s latest collection of black-off pastel drawings on white vellum is a saucy exploration of both body politics and culturally accepted images of femininity.

This self-named exhibition brings Daley, an associate professor in the painting and drawing department of the Ontario College of Art and Design, back to Calgary for her fourth solo exhibition at the Newzones Gallery.

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Cathy Daley's drawings are becoming more corporeal.
FROM GI
STYLE:
Surreal works

Known for her disembodied graces,
tutus and billowy party frocks, Daley's
work over the past few years has de-
veloped a more definite corporeal
side. Stockinged legs wearing black
stilettos are slowly becoming the
stars of the show.

"The inclusion of the legs in my re-
cent drawings," says Daley, "has al-
lowed me to work with different pos-
tures and gestures - drawing on my
interest in body language and the psy-
chological expressions found in the
language of fashion. I found that when
you take these postures out of their
context and isolate them, they can
seem extreme and often ridiculous."

"There is definitely something subtly
absurd and surreal about Daley's
works. While being both playful and
sensuous in their rendering, Daley's
drawings take a pointed poke at a
world made up of manufactured im-
ages of ideal femininity.

Take, for example, Daley's "Untit-
lled (2004)" - one of a series of medium-
scale drawings depicting the lower
halves of women in various standing
poses. It stands out because the dress
is being blown to one side by an ob-
viously strong wind. But the pose and
elegant pose of the unnaturally long
and thin legs are unaffected by the
force of the gust. The drawing brings
to mind stereotypical studio shots of
models bent over for a photo. It points to the formula
behind the stereotypes, which are built
on unrealistic ideals of perfection and
cultural caricatures propagated by the
fashion world.

Combining this subtle feminist cri-
tique with a serious dollop of cheek-

ness is Daley's "Unordered (2007)." In this
large, drawing on vellum, the little
black dress has completely disap-
ppeared and now only two legs wearing
striped stockings and black stilettos
remain, sprawling suggestively, the
legs immediately bring to mind the
heated Hollywood love scene where
all but the stockings and the shoes
have been blown away.

After a moment, an image more
bizarre than erotic pops into mind. Da-
ley's stripped dressing legs are almost
a humorous nod to the Wicked Witch
of the East who fell victim to Dorothy's
crushing house. In this work, an icon of
feminine wickiedness is tempered by a
sexual undertone creating an image
tension between feminine desire and
sassy flights of fancy.

Rumbling the connection between
the fantastical and icons of girl power
is Daley's four-metre-high drawing of
a single leg, "Untitled (2008)." Here the
stockinged leg has become a gigan-
tuan, overpowering entity.

"Quite like making the larger
works," says the soft-spoken Daley.
"These works have a physicality that
the smaller, more intimate drawings
don't have. They have the power to
physically transform a space."

The towering leg in its stiletto shoe
is an impressive icon of femininity. No
longer dainty or even remotely hu-
man-sized, it stands apart as an an-
tithesis to the idea of the feminine as
being petite, neatly contained and
dainty. Instead, Daley's leg sets off by
the high-society barrier to walk
off the vellum like Godzilla, stomping
all opposition in its path. With its sexy
stocking and "come get me" shoes, it is
a perfect homage to constructions of
female sexuality while gleefully retain-
ing its sense of empowerment.

From series of black dresses to gi-
gantuan shoes, Daley's show is a vi-
sually engaging take on our ever-evolv-
ing understanding of true girl power.