Cathy Daley

Essay by Renee Baert
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Cathy Daley’s untitled drawings present a morphology of dress, in which memory passes through a vector of fantasy. Inspired by the iconographies of female glamour found in high-fashion magazines and in the studios of a vintage Hollywood, Daley’s depictions of an extensive series of gowns and skirts proceed in an extravaganza of designs, an energetic proliferation of models of elegance and flair.

These life-size robes are drawn with sweeping, confident movements of black pastel on translucent white vellum. The series includes full-length gowns impossibly long and slender, with looping pin-thin straps; voluminous skirts that supersede the bodice almost entirely; crinolined gowns and form-fitting sheaths with ruffles or Spanish flares or ostrich feathers; circle skirts opened in twirling motion, the exposed legs in animated movements; an array of shoulder-baring bodices over skirts of every kind. The dresses charge the empty white field with all the charisma of icons, while the vivid strokes of Daley’s lines also lend them a sense of movement and verve.

These are images made to the measure of desire, idealized and unattainable objects. The shapely figures are a quotation of the female body reconstructed to a more fanciful proportion. No bodies inhabit these gowns, and no bodies could; they are fantasy’s transcendence of the corporeal, the materialization of a dream in the mind’s eye.

But as fantasy objects, these robes are also rooted in representation and mediations of the body. They derive from inherited stereotypes of glamour, residual traces of former ideals, contemporary “classics” of the feminine. If Daley’s drawings proffer a semiotics of feminine glamour, divorced from any “real” of the female body or day-to-day existence, her use of sources whose representations of femininity are a forceful presence in the cultural imaginary highlights how such representations shape the contours of identity. The datedness of the styles, which trace of nostalgia, together with a note of melancholy that accompanies the somber colour and absented body, situate the images in the field of memory, yet memory imprinted by a social iconography that is itself annexed by fantasy. In drawing this mental impress of the past into the present, Daley raise entirely contemporary issues concerning the female body as spectacle and object of voyeurism, the merchandising of the female body and the inextricable links between identity and language.

The work further addresses itself to the challenge for women of securing a language of female desire and sexuality from within the vocabulary of culture. Thus there exists an ambiguity in these depictions that sets in place an uncertain tension between the appeal of these gowns and a resistance to their allure. This resistance is marked by the very excess of their rendering – an exaggeration which highlights their illusory quality – and by the wit and irony of the work, with its effects of distanciation. This ambivalence finds an echo within feminist thought, between its forceful critique of the fashion industry and the recognition of fashion as an object of pleasure, an embodiment of fantasy and a vehicle of play. In weighing these contradictory stances, Elizabeth Wilson has pointed out that ambivalence is indeed a appropriate response to the contradictory and irreconcilable desires that fashion, rooted in the body and ensconced in fantasy, advances. “The daring of fashion”, she writes, “speaks dread as well as desire; the shell of chic, the aura of glamour, always hide a wound.”