

Mary Heebner's Venus Paintings

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By Charles Donelan



Courtesy Edward Cella Gallery

Mary Heebner's *Venus I (Moon... she shines on the Earth... silvery)*, 2013

VENUS ON WILSHIRE: The Edward Cella Art+Architecture Gallery (edwardcella.com) on Wilshire Boulevard is right across from the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, and it makes an ideal setting for Mary Heebner's *The Venus Paintings*, which will remain view there until December 28. These large, otherworldly fragments of female figures benefit greatly from the breathing space afforded by Cella's large rooms. They are also well served by the space's abundant natural light, as their surfaces are highly worked in multiple ways. As in her other recent projects referencing archaeology and sculpture, Heebner begins with photography and with poetry. For the Venus suite, Heebner took photos of carious ancient sculptures of the feminine form and printed them on fine paper, all the while meditating on an appropriate poetic text – in this case the fragments of Sappho. Heebner then drew and painted on top of that base figure to create these nuanced, layered paintings of torsos that match Renaissance draftsmanship with the sophisticated chromatics of high modernism. In some instances, the Sappho fragments were inscribed on the images, while in others they only appear as the works' titles. Finally, Heebner cast a magic texture and glow to her pieces by applying thin, nearly transparent sheet of handmade paper to parts of their surfaces.

Expressing an acute awareness of the sculptural tradition through the deft handling of her own chosen media, Heebner brings out the real women still living within these ancient Venus figures. As UCSB Professor Bruce Robertson writes in his essay for the exhibition catalogue, this "layer of transparent pink paper ... gathers and folds

like skin." Cloaked in handmade paper skin and brought to life by the artist's painterly touch, Venus emerges once more into the present.

It's a virtuoso performance, and one which Heebner's teacher and mentor William Dole would very much have appreciated. A selection of Dole's collages are also on view in the Cella gallery alongside the Venus paintings, and they are exquisite and enlightening, offering a glimpse of the creative ferment in the UCSB Art Department of the 1970s.