

'Jenny Scobel'. Galerie der Stadt Backnang (DE) & Zeno X Gallery, Antwerp (BE). Text: Rose Van Doninck. 2006.

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A clouded sky throws a large shadow over a small temple on a high stage, while a plain and a heart are running wild. Hollywood actress Michelle Pfeiffer stands on the foreground, lost in thought and untouched for what is happening behind her. *Willing* (2002) shows us a portrait of Jenny Scobel. This self-willed artist assembles artworks by sampling cartoons, press clippings and pictures into a new image.

“Whoever said that iconography was a simple matter, has never looked into one of Scobel’s works”

(Lily Faust in *New York Art World*, May 2001)

Reproducing artworks in your own name was a motive that was already used by the ‘Picture Generation’ during the seventies and eighties. The very well known image loses its authentic status and becomes a cliché, after used for copying. Cindy Sherman, Sherrie Levine, Richard Prince and Barbara Kruger use found footage from the film-, commercial- and media world to criticise contemporary American society. Appropriation art is born.

At first sight Jenny Scobel uses the same strategy, but when you take a closer look you notice there is more going on in her

portraits. The images give away a variety of sources, from 15th century Flemish Primitives to contemporary pictures out of glossy magazines. Head, body and background are assembled which results in an unusual series with each time the same face. Scobel does not hesitate to (re)use known and less known fragments. The only criterion is that it has to resonate, has to be powerful enough to be used as a keynote for her works.

While artists like Sherman, Levine and Prince use the 'fast' medium photography; Scobel works with graphite on wood. This handcrafted method gives the work a nostalgic atmosphere. Every work of Scobel is a process that takes several months. Images are screened for their graphic qualities and are assembled in her head to new portraits. It takes weeks to prepare the wooden panels and draw on them. Every panel gets a gesso coat before the drawing and is afterwards covered by a thin layer of wax. This blurs the graphite line by which a surface arises that almost resembles a photo. A dull, light-absorbing glow causes a certain distance between model and viewer. A distance that already exists during the creation of the artwork, because the subject stays physically absent during the drawing. Both Jenny Scobel and the Picture Generation make portraits without the knowledge of the model, let alone without their approval.

Already during the Ancient Times portraits were created. In Egypt and Rome people were portrayed, but these representations served only as decoration and not as a personalised card. Different people reacted different to this new fashion. Iconoclasts

prohibited every depiction of the flesh, while certain people could not stop duplicating and spreading their own image. The hey-days of Italian and Flemish art during late Middle Ages made it possible to create portraits as a memento for future generations or just as a souvenir. Different reasons were applied to give prominent painters the commission to make portraits of individuals and families.

Flemish painter Hans Memling (c.1435-1494) was a pioneer concerning the painted portrait. His patrons were shown not only from their best side, by tailoring some parts of the head to the requirements of contemporary fashion, but they also could choose between different backgrounds. A landscape as scenery was something totally new and became the new trend. Existing or fictional buildings were placed in a green environment, which exist merely by the grace of the fantasy of the painter and the customer. This depicts the protagonist in a livelier manner in comparison to the dark backgrounds that were used by painters of those days.

Just like Memling, Jenny Scobel places her subjects in vivid scenery. Cartoonish figures from the thirties and forties infiltrate her work, while in a few panels, like *Untitled* (1997) and *The Tango Lesson* (1995), the person portrayed stays locked in his own small world and space. Betty Boop and other characters of the Fleisher Studio's play a significant role, but which one? Maybe the peculiar scenes are just the imagination of the subject. Or maybe the model is an actress in these vivid films, where she transforms herself in a different character every time the

scenery changes. The well-known graceful body of an Italian film diva in *Gina* (2000) has another meaning than the bust of a young girl with her coat buttoned up in *Footsteps one way* (2000). Another connotation, a different kind of relation arises between background and model.

The model seems to incorporate this alienation in two ways: she does not seem to fit in her environment, nor in her own body. Even the viewer is blown of his socks by seeing these mysterious works. Three quarter and frontal portrayed these images pretend a direct approach, but when you look closer you notice the figures are always slightly out of centre. It seems if they want to step aside to give a closer look on the background, to sneak us in to their own world.

For more than ten years these funny backgrounds pop up in the portraits of Scobel, until she decides to use 'real' fictional landscapes. The last years a fence by a house or a panoramic landscape with threatening clouds serves as environment for her models. Also interiors and floral motives are used as a setting, however they were also used the years before. Although the contrast between the decorative background and the model diminishes in works like *Before Tomorrow* (2005) and *Just the Same* (2005), a certain distance stays into being. Remembrances, trauma and obsessions weigh heavily on the introvert characters.

The disturbing gazes result in melancholic series in which famous images always appear. The body from the well-known portrait of a young girl with green swimming suit from Rineke

Dijkstra (*Kolobrzeg, Poland, July 26, 1992*) appears in *Ms. Nesbit* (2004), while a portrait of Flemish Primitive Rogier Van der Weyden serves in for instance *Pulse* (1998-2001) and *Blue Veil* (2003-2004). Not only the images of other artist pass along, also famous heads and bodies of women play a role in the body of works of Jenny Scobel, like Michelle Pfeiffer in *Whispers* (1999) and *Willing* (2002) and a young Jacqueline 'Jackie' Kennedy Onassis in for instance *Dancing with no shoes* (2003).

For several years the same face is elaborated in different series, by which the character seems to evolve intrinsically. Young girls become adult women by changing clothes and environment. Nevertheless these images act in a fantasy world of which every girl dreams. Or is it a fictional world where everybody has different clones to escape everyday life, like they are portrayed in film and literature these days. The portraits of Scobel will never show all the anxieties present in her work. The disorientation is complete, the look haunted.