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Marcia Gygli Kling

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dART INTERNATIONAL
750A St. Clair Ave. W., Toronto
Ontario, Canada M6C 1B5
Tel: 416-651-5778
E-mail: info@dartmagazine.com
www.dartmagazine.com



Canadian Opera Company's Four Seasons Center for the Performing Arts - Diamond and Schmitt architects. Photo: Sam Javanrou

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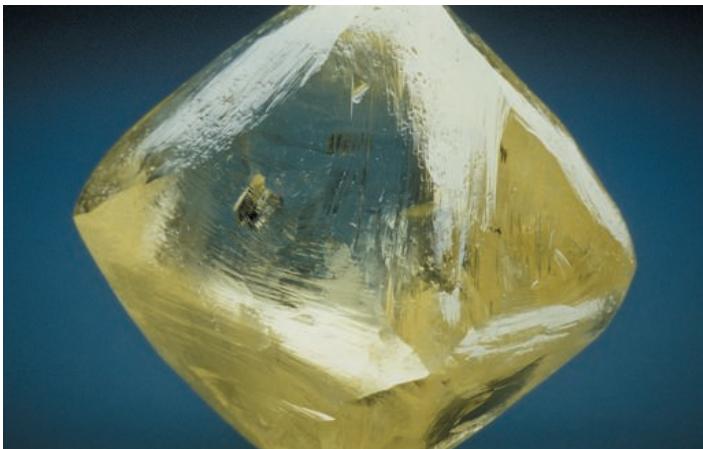
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Royal Ontario Museum Night View. Image: Royal Ontario Museum © 2008

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Top left: Robert G. Edelman, *Now or Whenever*, 2008, India ink watercolor and charcoal on paper, 8-3/4 x 10-3/4". Top right: New Zealand artist Hye Rim Lee, in her studio in New York. Above right: Marlene Dumas, *Waiting*, oil on canvas. Above right: Royal Ontario Museum's *The Nature of Diamonds* Exhibition - *Oppenheimer Diamond*. Photo: Chip Clark Copyright Smithsonian Institution

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Sali Taylor, *Not in Oz Anymore (detail)*, 2008, collage on wood



Kaethe Kauffman, *Black, Blue*, detail, 2003, mixed media giclee, 24 x 36"

Body Mappings

Eileen Senner, Kaethe Kauffman, Tina Blondell and Giedre Montvila at Allen Gallery in New York

by Mary Hrbacek

In the exhibition entitled *Body Mapping*, Eileen Senner, Kaethe Kauffman, Tina Blondell and Giedre Montvila explore the human body, each from their individual standpoint, whether the focus is on metaphysical issues, bodily mechanisms, personal growth patterns, or societal obsessions with superficial appearances. No subject in art is more enduring or diverse than the human figure, a versatile platform for each artist to hone her artistic vision. The desire to conceal one's flaws to gain acceptance, achieve heightened beauty or be sexually alluring predates ancient Egyptian culture. In popular culture, these reasons are taken by media hype to extremes in the interests of commercialism. Youth and beauty are worshiped with quasi-religious zeal to the exclusion of positive character, or personal behavior.

Eileen Senner's enigmatic painted, oil glazed wood panels display glowing fragmented torsos set in dark expanses of undefined space that reveal few clues to their origins or identity. Without a light source, they emanate illumination from within, creating a magical or occult aura. Their anonymity recalls fragmented Greek and Roman antiquities while the softened contours provide atmospheric effects

evoking eternity. Inspired by the ineffable content in the cave paintings at Altamira, Spain, the panels display illuminated figures of men, as indicated by the absence of the indented waistline typical of female anatomy. The subtle indications of neck, shoulders, buttocks and upper arms signal the human form, demonstrating how even small details provide visual clues that aid in labeling objects. Are they

warriors or workers, statesmen or hunters? Faint networks of surface patterns, wrinkled lines, sponged pockmarks, or parallel lines and indentations are among the few visual details that give the viewer information with which to speculate as to the history and meaning of the severely introspective representations. The distressed, aged surfaces embedded in layers of glazed paint create the illusion of matter worn away by the elements, suggesting the passage of millennia. These profound mute manifestations recall Rembrandt's painting *Aristotle Contemplating the Bust of Homer*. The quietly mysterious, iconic forms elicit the glowing quality of lingering human life, even in the midst of disintegration. When we ask "Where does the I reside?" we recognize that even fragmented anatomy speaks of the human being, which is informed by a human presence. It is left to the viewer to appreciate their mysterious beauty despite the obscurity of their origins. As virtually noumenal forms, they are objects of intuition, devoid of adequate sense data to make them knowable to us absolutely.

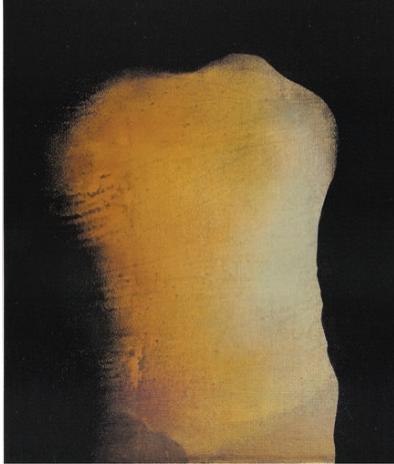
In her sophisticated hand-painted photographs, Kaethe Kauffman probes the body's dynamics, bringing muscular substructures to light in surface patterns created by paint-drenched string. Kauffman compares the skin's surface on cropped forms, before and after patterning occurs. Muscular empowerment and autonomy are established as the body, in essence, paints itself. Marked by designs that demonstrate their functions, a palm devoid of fingers

or isolated individual fingers yield narratives of self-reliance and physical coordination. Square shoulders and tapering waist project a strain of beauty independent of sexual connotations. There is no passivity in evidence; a new rigorous definition of femininity is forged as the beauty of form merges with its function. The body's mechanisms emerge as singularly dynamic; the elbows and arms disclose no gender; the nuanced textures and juxtaposed forms suggest, with graphic power, choreographed bodily movements. Kauffman investigates how fine muscle movements impact the individual, leading to increased self-awareness. In *Muscle Movement: Blue Elbow*, she explores the effects of the aging process by comparing similarly painted young and old skin. Kauffman derails passive art historical females by her focus on the non-reproductive aspects of the female body. There is purpose and significance in every move the body makes, a fact she patiently highlights as she champions the belated recognition of the body as a symbol of both male and female strength and power.

Giedra Montvila takes issue with the barrage of media-generated glamour propaganda that inundates people daily, manufacturing images of desire that feed the consumer culture. She is concerned with sifting the real from the false among the panoply of commercial images that accost us. Montvila's awareness of this destructive cultural obsession arises from

Giedre Montvila, *Lipstick*, pencil on paper, 14 x 11"





Eileen Senner, *Untitled*, 2005, oil on wood panel, 16 x 12"

her personal experience as a runway fashion model, affording her a unique insight into the artificial world of glitz that generates an unreal view of the celebrity world. Her detailed pencil drawings mirror the scrutiny that outward appearance is subjected to, as we measure ourselves and compete in our contest for prestige and acceptance. Beauty yields power, but the over-emphasis on its time-consuming maintenance distorts our sense of real inner value. Individual traits become magnified under such scrutiny, mirroring the disproportionate emphasis on appearance that exists in contemporary culture. With acute observation, she recreates every pouch, pock, shadow and line on her subjects' exposed faces. Instead of revealing glamour, she illuminates the personality behind the mask, defined by myriad complexities that trouble the mind and mar the calm of their facial expressions. Montvila debunks cultural falsehood in her quest for truth and reality. She delves beneath the outward façade, using detailed appearance as a vehicle to reveal inner realities. Giedre Montvila renders her pencil on paper drawings with the skill and detail reminiscent of Albrecht Dürer. Her disillusion with falsely glamorized images is transformed into a highly personal expose of not only the appearance, but also the character, personality and psychic turmoil she unearths in her subjects. In *Lost Child*,

the girl appears to be wearing eye make-up, and lipstick, inappropriate adornment in one so young. Make-up masks reality while observation of facial details leads the viewer to discern deeper qualities. The girl's sulky mouth and sad half-closed eyes relate the pressure she experiences to be a small-scale woman. Her childhood is forfeited in a society that puts its unseemly expectations on ever-younger girls, as mature women become increasingly assertive and independent. *Gesture* exposes the shadows and blemishes of a forlorn middle-aged man whose disquieted gaze expresses the psychic burdens he experiences. Montvila's drawings reveal not only physical attributes, but also the complexities, fear, anxiety, anger and alienation that results when we are deprived of an authentic self-image. Her drawings capture the turmoil this confusion creates, as the media seek to control our lives based on fantasy images of glamour and decadence.

In her current watercolor series, Tina Blondell appropriates poses and symbols inspired by Biblical and mythic heroines, in her pursuit of the strength and knowledge these figures embody. Through her creativity, Blondell transforms her own inner pain into a sense of wellness that empowers her to reproduce the dynamic energy of historic figures in images of her female friends. Her vision of the human condition is shaped by the suffering and redemption inherent in these narratives. Blondell uses iconic poses and sacred symbols to elevate women to visionary positions where the heroic parallels can be recognized and appreciated. She employs her signature overall tattoo pattern to signify outwardly the struggle and triumph one experiences in surmounting life's challenges. Her decorative impulse is influenced by the Gustav Klimt's *Secession* paintings, by the Maori creation symbol, and by the Polynesian sign for immortality. Blondell employs the spiral, a symbol for natural growth patterns, over her subjects' skin to commemorate periods of passage that mark their outward appearance. She

challenges the viewer to embrace an altered definition of beauty that includes these manifested marks of growth. Though the surface patterning can be mistaken for decoration, it mirrors the growth patterns in shells and in bisected tree trunks, creating a link between her subjects and the natural world. Blondell focuses on mature women she depicts as healers. She makes no moral judgments, but remains interested in women as growing, evolving entities. The dark background highlights the illuminated pale patterned skin of her subjects that creates the outward appearance of primitive priestesses, or goddesses of early human origins.

Both Kauffman and Blondell manifest the invisible in their uniquely personal imagery that records inner realities by marks on the skin's surface. Montvila's background as a fashion runway model gives her insight into the artificial exterior code of beauty that rules the world of celebrity. This insight spurs her fascination with the minute details of personal appearance that can lead to deeper comprehension. Through her searching gaze, the personal turmoil of her subjects dominates the images. Senner's reductive torsos are defined by time and memory. While they speak of the instinct to survive in the human genetic heritage, they remain haunting symbolic reminders of mortality.

Tina Blondell, *Jezebel*, 2002, watercolor on paper, 15" x 9"

