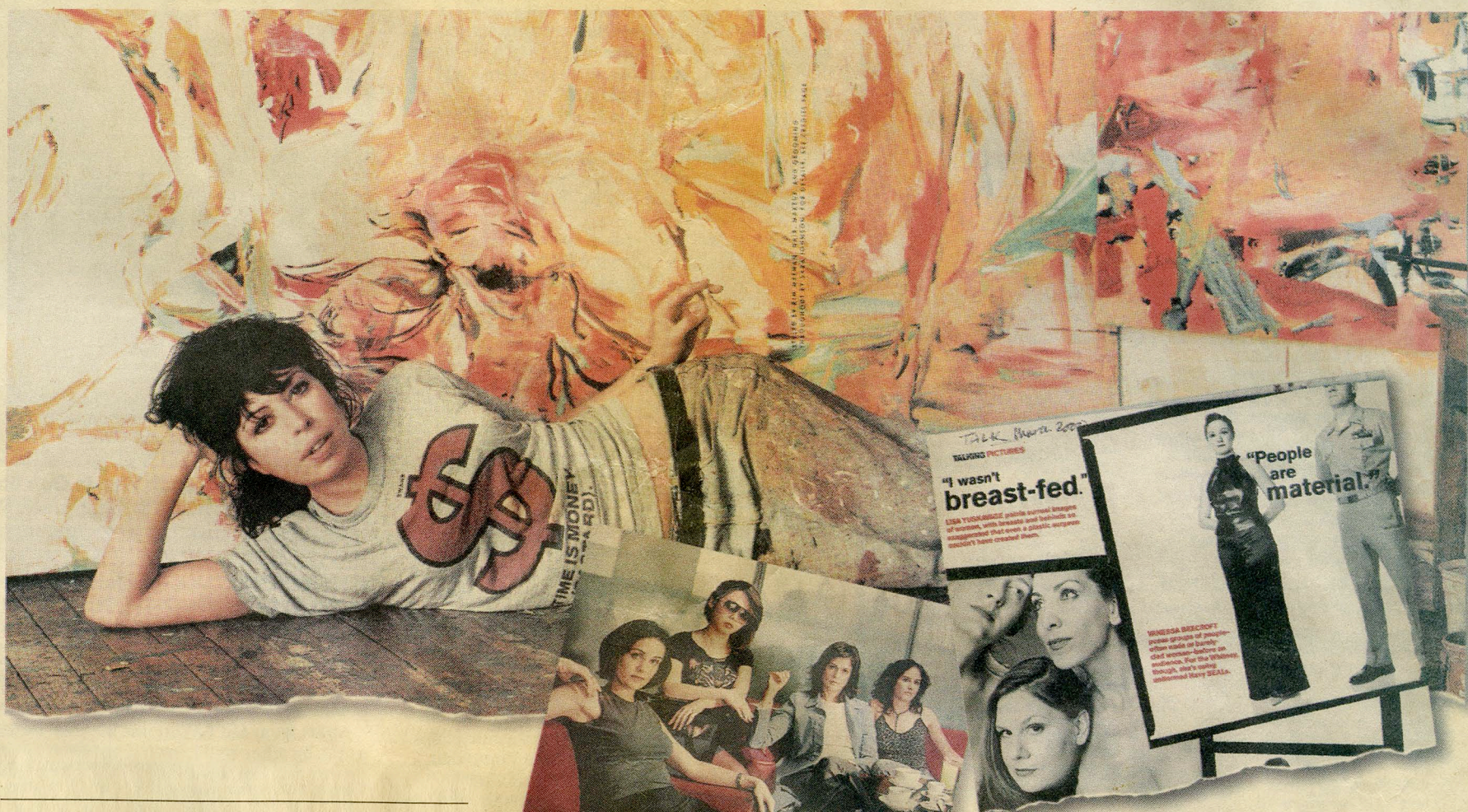


The New York Times

Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman

Glossy Images That Both Mimic and Mock Male Sexuality



By ROBERTA SMITH

London can keep its Y.B.A.'s, or Young British Artists. New York may have a hip abbreviation of its own, the B.Y.T.'s: Beautiful Young Things. These are the good-looking 20- and 30-something artists whose photographs have been cropping up in glossy magazines this season. Their louche, carefully orchestrated images indicate that it may take more than the usual amounts of glamour, sex appeal and physical attractiveness to be a successful artist these days. And the more exposed flesh, the better.

In the January-February issue of *i-D*, a fashion-rock-art magazine, photographs of female newcomers, including several artists, often approached soft-core levels in their poses and uncovered skin. In the February *Vanity Fair*, Inka Essenhigh, Cecily Brown, John Currin and other artists bared various areas of midriff, chest and leg in full-color photographs. In the February *Harper's Bazaar*, eight young female photographers lounged around a Chelsea restaurant, looking pretty much like a gang of disaffected supermodels.

The April *Vogue* brought the young, exceptionally beautiful artist Rachel Feinstein, something of a regular in fashion magazine society pages, perched on a

bed in a glittering evening dress, toying with little Play-Doh sculptures and looking like a cross between a Hollywood starlet and the fairy princess she has played in some of her homemade movies. (The incidence of female artists in evening wear may be on the rise. An article previewing the Whitney Biennial in the March issue of *Talk* magazine included the artist Vanessa Beecroft in satiny palazzo pants and halter, and E. V. Day in lame.) And in May there was Tracey Emin in *British Vogue*, lolling about a hotel room with Kate Moss, although only Ms. Moss got naked.

These images make rich reading material. Many of them are right in step with our unbuttoned, slouchy, increasingly eroticized culture. These are the days of

underwear as outerwear, X-rated fashion photography, devolving standards of modesty and privacy, and relentless image bombardment. These are also the days of ubiquitous naked bodies, and sexual references in contemporary art. The number of photography shows of people of all shapes, sizes, colors, ages and genders in the altogether reaches double digits nearly every month. Given such reflections of culture's changing mores — and photography's role in communicating them — it's not surprising that the photograph of the artist, that venerable art world subgenre, should be shifting shape a bit.

Some people want to take these images as signs of the nonart world media's renewed interest in the art world, and therefore of the return of an 1980's-style art boom. But the glossified 80's artists were overwhelm-

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From left, Todd Eberle/*Vanity Fair*; Catherine Opie/*Harper's Bazaar*; *Talk* magazine.

Portrait of the Artist as a Young Woman, Mimicking and Mocking the Men

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ingly male. The mediagenic artists of the oughties, as the current decade is sometimes called, are often women. And they are women who exude high levels of postfeminist attitude and are as fearless about tackling sexual issues in their work as they are about using their sexuality — or general attractiveness — whenever the media look in their direction. Many of them are putting their own spin on the highbrow seduction implicit in the photographs of male artists.

Lord knows, there's plenty to spin. After all, a male artist's physique, his three-day stubble, his slightly dangerous or mysteriously moody

Fusing art and identity in a way that many have found unsettling.

expression are no less sexual than the provocative poses of women. But male sexuality and its power are taken for granted, unremarkable and thus invisible. Women, in contrast, continue to be identified more with their sexuality and judged more by appearance and according to narrower ideals of beauty. As a result, those without the proper looks or attitude tend to lose out — as in high school.

This makes for a much more complicated, intriguing and confounding situation than that of the 1980's. It only adds to the conundrum that many of the women in these images are themselves photographers who

frequently photograph young women like themselves, dressed and undressed, and who also moonlight in the commercial world for fashion and other magazines.

The situation is fascinating and dismaying in equal parts. It's fascinating when these women use the artist's photograph to comment on the history of the genre. The dismay comes from the question of who is using whom.

For example, the artists' photographs in *Vanity Fair* and Harper's *Bazaar* sent the unsettling message that only women who were white, thin and pretty needed apply. Missing from *Vanity Fair* was Lisa Yuskavage, whose paintings of weirdly distorted, concupiscent female adolescents have attracted a lot of attention but who lacks the sylphlike form of Ms. Brown and Ms. Essenhigh or Justine Kurland and the other women in the Harper's *Bazaar* spread.

But Ms. Yuskavage also had her say. In the Whitney Biennial preview article in *Talk* magazine, she appeared in a photograph in which she was closely flanked by two naked female models. The combination of clothed and unclothed women was startling. We're so much more used to seeing naked female models in the company of clothed male artists — most famously in the many photographs of Matisse at work.

Which brings us to the "girls just want to have fun" rationale — fun similar to that enjoyed by successful boy artists. It's not surprising that the girls may also want to parody what the boys do. The precedent for such parody, which still looks shocking today, is the advertisement that the video artist and sculptor Lynda Benglis ran in a 1974 issue of *Artforum*. Hair cropped, body buffed and oiled, she wore only rhinestone-studded sunglasses and flaunted an enormous plastic phallus.



Vogue

Especially parodic among the recent photographs was that of a young painter named Stella Schnabel in *i-D*, which showed her stretched out on her studio floor, bare to the waist and wearing a sarong. (She looked like something out of Gauguin.) It sug-

gested a direct retort to a famous 1980's photograph of her father, Julian, and three other (male) Neo-Expressionists assuming bare-chested, muscle man poses in Mary Boone's SoHo gallery.

Cecily Brown's photographs often

The artist Rachel Feinstein echoed her own homemade movies when she appeared in the April *Vogue*, wearing a glittering gown and toying with Play-Doh sculpture.

pun on conventional portrayals of male artists. The photographs in *Vanity Fair*, which were taken by Todd Eberle, show her reclining on a studio floor that is splattered with paint and dotted with cigarette butts in a manner that would have done Pollock proud. A photograph that appeared in *The New Yorker* made a similar point. It showed Ms. Brown from the back as she stood, cigarette in hand, studying one of her paintings — a pose frequently assumed by brooding male artists (Hopper, Rothko, Brice Marden, whoever). Except that Ms. Brown was wearing a close-fitting hot pink skirt and slouching her hip a bit teasingly.

Perhaps we should think of artists like Ms. Brown and her colleagues as presenting a kind of performance art package. They may fit within the tradition of female artists who have parlayed their good looks, sexual energy and artistic talent into an irresistible force, or at least a semblance of one. Early 60's precursors include Carolee Schneeman, known especially for chaotic, orgylike performances, but also for provocative self-portrait photographs and painted found-object assemblages. (Funnily enough, Ms. Brown's paintings resemble documentary photographs of Ms. Schneemann's best-known performances, with their masses of writhing, painted bodies.)

Another predecessor is Yayoi Kusama, who turned the Happening into a kind of psychedelic love-and-paint-in while also making pulsating abstract "net" paintings and walk-in

environments in which walls and objects were covered with stuffed fabric phalluses.

These women fused art and personal identity in a way that many people found unsettling, because it seemed to corrupt art's purity. They also translated into conventional, easy-to-read female terms the presumptive, palpable but rarely commented-on swagger of male artists.

In these post-Warholian times, Ms. Brown and her contemporaries don't perform within the art world proper. They perform within a much larger, more accessible arena: the media. In this respect they may be taking their tips more from Madonna than from any art world precedents. But it is still debatable whether they are using their sexuality any more than their male counterparts always have.

None of these issues can be neatly resolved. It would be nice to think that the recent photographs of the Beautiful Young Things indicate that as women become more comfortable with themselves, the ways in which they can be comfortable, both in appearance and behavior, can be more varied and flexible.

But ambiguity, if not outright contradiction, is endemic in our times, and may even reflect the increased influence of women. What seems certain is simply this: women and photography are among the most volatile, fluid elements in society today. Both seem to be going places they haven't been before, doing things they haven't done before. It should surprise no one that whenever they get together — in the artist's photograph or elsewhere — almost anything can happen.

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