



***OUR GRANDMOTHER'S DAUGHTERS:
THE WORK OF CYNTHIA HELLYER HEINZ***

CYNTHIA HELLYER HEINZ AND DEBORAH SMITH-SHANK



Pleasure in Fleeting Nocturnal Being, Continuous Regeneration, Rooted Invitation
(2006) by Cynthia Hellyer Heinz, 22" x 30", color pencil.

Cynthia Hellyer Heinz's Visual Surrealist Narratives

My drawings are visual surrealist narratives. My intention is that they not passively hang on the wall but stimulate a dialogue. I use symbols, both apparent (the lace for beauty) and ambiguous (the seeds for time) to stimulate a thoughtful conversation with the viewers.

All the drawings are done using a variety of color pencils on paper. I work gradually, building the layers of light and dark until the form emerges into saturated color. The drawing process is for me a passionate, sensuous experience of constant discovery. I am learning, by drawing, to feel through the surface light and texture into the fiber of the image. I work from life, setting objects close enough to examine them intimately. As I draw, the vegetables rot, the lace gets dusty and the flesh dries out. I am expressing a passage of time with aging reproductive flesh, both human and organic.

These images expose a conflict between what is considered culturally viable, beautiful and what is rotting, useless, and horrific. Intentionally, the shallow surfaces are rendered in layers of rich, sensuous color yet, when examined, the detritus of our true nature appears and questions why we dismiss that continuous creative power which is born from genuine acceptance of our own truth. My grandmother, at ninety, looked into the mirror and asked, "Who is that old woman?" We are more than just a skin bag. At our core is genuine beauty and we wrap it up in artifice.



The Beyond is Not What is Infinitely Remote But What is Nearest at Hand (2005) by Cynthia Hellyer Heinz, 22" x 30", color pencil.

I am committed to the idea that art is an integral part of life, and learning to see art and life as one offers a distinct depth of holistic existence and synergy. Nothing stands alone. It is all part of a fabric, a weaving of layers of matter that are continuously being born, ripening, and dying.



That Which Was Lost is Reflected, What Remains is Eternal (2005) by Cynthia Hellyer Heinz, 22" x 15", color pencil.

Deborah Smith-Shank on C. H. Heinz's Drawings of Her Mother



Reflections on a Passing Moment, Life's Ability to Regenerate (2005) by Cynthia Hellyer Heinz, 22" x 15", color pencil.

Artifacts throughout visual histories leave us clues about cultural belief systems. Some of the most potent signs that often cross cultures and centuries are ones that portray woman as maiden, mother, and crone. To acknowledge these images simply as the three aspects of the female lifespan, however is to provide for less than adequate understandings of the roles visual artifacts play in any culture, and especially insights into the stages of women's lives. Visual artifacts guide our understanding of the multiple possibilities that are available to us as we negotiate our own life spans. They offer possibilities and dreams of what could and might be.



Flight of Time, Memory's Delicate Balance (2004) by Cynthia Hellyer Heinz, 22" x 15", color pencil.

The gaze is always an important consideration when we look at artifacts depicting girls and women. Who is the intended viewer for the artifact? Whose dreams and possibilities are considered when a particular image of a girl or woman is contemplated? Traditionally (and mistakenly), artworks were generally assumed to have been created by a heterosexual man for the gaze of a similarly heterosexual man. However, artists from Artemisia Gentileschi (Garrard, 1989) in Renaissance times to contemporary New York graffiti artist Constance Brady (Ganz, 2006) among many, many other women artists both lesbian and heterosexual (as well as others who are not White, male, and heterosexual) have claimed gaze for their own uses and desires.

Women and girls are portrayed as innocent or whore, as nurturer or warrior, as wise or naïve. Rarely are these dichotomies broken into the trajectories that mark them as temporal and serving only as ephemeral edges of a real-life continuum. Creators of fine art, cartoons, video games, advertisements, and clothing, among other forms of visual artifacts, have modeled women in these multiple guises, and these artifacts serve as food for introspection and response. Viewers may try on characteristics of visual renderings and shed them when they are not comfortable. Viewers may assume a specific role when it is needed for comfort, protection, or desire and change them when they are no longer viable. Our consumption of these artifacts helps us understand the past, cope with the present, and contemplate the future. We avoid those we fear, and we embrace those that make sense within our own temporal biological and cultural contexts.

Myths and images associated with post-menopausal women throughout visual history are generally innocuous or scary. The scary ones focus on the beastly nature of old women with allusions to suspicious magical abilities and wicked stepmothers and they fight for our attention alongside sour-faced sedentary images such as *Whistler's Mother* (James Abbott McNeill Whistler, 1871). Images of old women marked by time are intriguing and frightening. The seduction of these images and the concurrent repulsion force us toward (no more than) a quick glance in a full length mirror to see where we fit within the spectrum of aging. While some artists including Alice Neel have portrayed older women with honesty and humor, most have turned away, as did Perseus from

as not to confront the monster.

In the work of Cynthia Hellyer Heinz, we confront the monster, replete with lines caused by sorrow and laughter, evidence of childbearing on bellies and breasts, and the myriad of other marks that time leaves on a female body; marks acquired within the confines of a long and rich lifespan. Her work gives us pause to consider all these notions and to reflect on our own aging bodies. Her work emphasizes sensuality and wisdom, strength and purpose, and the cycle of life. The marks associated with aging are carefully considered and skillfully rendered. Her work gives us reason to pause and consider the trajectory of a long, loving, useful, and interesting life. It challenges us to contemplate the writing of time on her bodies and our own.

Cynthia Hellyer Hines Response to Deborah Smith-Shank's Commentary

Smith-Shank's commentary nails some of my thoughts about the Hot Mama series. The notion of the gaze, constructed, and distorted through anxiety from loss of beauty and relevance, is certainly communicated in my work. The idea of the monster, witch, crone older female, being marginalized by the loss of her smooth youthful visage—the dismissal of her powerful knowledge, grace and wisdom—this is the discourse that I hope my work generates. Our history, traditions and hope are etched in these faces of age.

I had been thinking of obliterating some of the woman's body and moving her into the context of nature in my future works, but after reading your essay I plan instead to bring more of the direct, confident gaze that reflects the sustainable strength based on time and self worth.

Self-censorship, a characteristic women employ for general acceptance, diminishes the possible potency of the work to affect changes in thinking. It is time for empowerment and appreciation of the lines that map our past and present our attitude toward the future. Not the downward gaze, but rather the thoughtful direct sight of connection.



Breathless Fruits of Living (2003) by Cynthia Hellyer Heinz, 30" x 22", color pencil.

References

- Ganz, Nicholas (2006). *Graffiti women: Street art from five continents*. London: Thames & Hudson Ltd.
- Garrard, Mary D. (1989). *Artemisia Gentileschi*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

About the Collaboration in Creating the Visual Essay

Cindy and I work in the same building and have enjoyed multiple (sometimes lengthy) hallway discussions related to art, feminism, aging bodies, and the joys of being new (and very young) grandmothers. This article is one result of these conversations and the impact of her very powerful artwork on my consciousness as an artist, art educator, feminist scholar, mentor, woman, mother, and grandmother. (Deborah Smith-Shank, September 14, 2007)

About the Authors

Cynthia Hellyer Hines earned a B.F.A. from Pratt Institute in Drawing and Art Education and an M.F.A. in Drawing from Northern Illinois University. Upon completion of this degree she was awarded a Teaching Fellowship and has been an instructor at N.I.U. since 1998. Cynthia has worked as the Foundations Drawing Administrator and the Graduate Teaching Assistant Mentor in Drawing for the last three years. Beginning in the fall of 2006, Cynthia became the acting Foundations Coordinator at Northern Illinois University. She has been active in Foundations in Art Theory and Education, chairing and presenting on panels at national conferences, as well as participating in the inauguration of the national "Think Tank" on foundations in art which is being developed into the Institute for Innovative Teaching. "My mission as an educator and artist is to inspire thoughtful communication and empower with skills, techniques, and creative vision."

Deborah Smith-Shank received her Ph.D. from Indiana University in 1992 and since that time has taught undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral students at Northern Illinois University as well as served as Associate Chair of the School of Art and Head of the Art Education Division. She has served the art education profession as president of both the National Art Education Association's Women's Caucus and the Lesbian Gay Bi-sexual Transgender Queer Caucus. She is currently serving as elected North American World Counselor of the International Society for Education Through Art. Smith-Shank's research has consistently been involved with artifacts of visual culture examined through semiotic lenses and is published in over 100 journal articles and book chapters, as well as in her 2004 book, *Semiotics and Visual Culture: Sights, Signs, and Significance*. Smith-Shank has been an invited scholar/speaker in multiple national and international venues and is she currently a visiting professor at the Ohio State University.



Glasses, We All Reflect the Same Light (2004) by Cynthia Hellyer Heinz, 22" x 15", color pencil.

Correspondence regarding this visual essay should be addressed to the authors at debatart@niu.edu and cheinz4@comcast.net. Author Web sites are at <http://www.niu.edu/art/arted/art-edweb/NIUArtEdFacDSmith-Shank.htm> and <http://www.cynthiahellyerheinz.com/>