



Susan Hauptman, 'Self-Portrait (La Perla #3)' (2006).

SUSAN HAUPTMAN: DRAWINGS

Forum Gallery

Can work be compelling and elegantly accomplished yet repellent at the same time? Susan Hauptman's self-portraiture has all the fascination of a cobra, hypnotic but deadly.

Throughout her career, Ms. Hauptman has worked only on paper and only in charcoal and pastel. She is a consummate technician whose work shares features with Verism, that cold, static branch of *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity) portraiture now on view at the Metropolitan Museum. Her Forum show coincides with "Glitter and Doom," which it imitates in explicit ways. Role playing, crucial to the erotic life of Weimar Berlin, repeats itself here as self-advertisement.

The most unsettling of Ms. Hauptman's self-depictions are sanitized evocations of Otto Dix's prostitutes rendered with Christian Schad's glacial detachment. An attractive, elfin woman in real life, she fictionalizes herself as larger-than-life with an androgynous, near-shaven head and *maison de tolérance* lingerie. Her buzz-cut hair, more feminine in life, turns deliberately masculine on paper, resembling a female impersonator. Together with see-through brothel-wear, the unlovely figure suggests both disease and sexual defiance.

Her precise, dry modeling of forms (gorgeous ears and pubic hair), aptitude for transparent fabrics, and insistent frontality recall Schad. Ms. Hauptman's husband, appearing only in profile, is a dead ringer for the transvestite who

looms behind Schad's famed 1927 portrait of Count St. Genois d' Anneau-court. The androgynous face and the provocative costuming of "Self-Portrait / La Perla," nos. 1,2, and 3, summon a butch dominatrix. (Compare to Otto Dix's 1922 watercolors "The Dream of the Sadist" or "Girl Before a Mirror.") Weimar's thigh-high black stockings give way to lacy, black opera gloves. With the figure in a sheer slip the effect is the same: sexual suggestion tinged with kinkiness.

New Objectivity's small details have a narrative, critical edge that permits the full impact of the work to communicate itself. By contrast, Ms. Hauptman's tiny details — a deliberate pinhole in the gullet of one figure, slight rouging of part of an ear on another — remain idiosyncratic.

Lacking the scathing emotional drive of New Objectivity, Ms. Hauptman's whiff of corrosion is offered only in irony. Her work does not pretend to be about anything more than her own constructed identities. Therein lies the poison. Her imagery repeats without demur, a reigning lie of contemporary culture: We can make ourselves up as we please. The fetishized Self is hollow, drained — like a Cindy Sherman portrait — of indwelling reality. The subject has vacated its own skin.

— Maureen Mullarkey

Until January 20 (745 Fifth Ave. at 57th Street).