



Susan Hauptman, *Self-Portrait*, 1998, charcoal, pastel and gold leaf on paper, 54" x 38" (photo courtesy of Forum Gallery and the Georgia Museum of Art).

## A T H E N S

Absurd, unsettling and thoroughly theatrical, **SUSAN HAUPTMAN's** life-scale, charcoal and pastel self-portrait drawings (*Georgia Museum of Art, November 23—January 16*) hold their own at the denouement of a feminist century. The 52-year-old Hauptman, like some menopausal Snow White, eyes the societal mirror warily, daring someone to cease calling her the "fairest of them all." While Hauptman may be perceived as just one more in a long line of self-deconstructionists, producing gender-destabilizing counter-representations which undermine the stereotypes they flaunt, she integrates such complexities with an unprecedented lack of self-consciousness. Glamour versus aging, oppressively rigid gender roles versus radically constructed identities—such conflicts are all subtly implied through loaded details, such as the suggestively uterine vase in *Self Portrait on Display*, which bears Hauptman's husband's visage. (His aquiline profile is a familiar trope in her recent work). With a tentative two-fingered grasp, she holds the empty vase at womb-level by its fallopian-tube handle. Highlighted just below it is an oh-so

phallic, floral foofaraw, teasingly blended into the tulle gown's overall patterning. The figure's head is turned slightly, the jaw clenched and the bony brow shadowed over with suspicion.

This testy dynamism is found in the other works from 1998, as is the conceptual friction produced by the contrast of Hauptman's androgynous aspects—the close-cropped hair, the sharp Camille Paglia-esque lantern-jaw with the little-miss-catholic-school-girl and fluffy femme-fatale outfits. Thus, a butch energy fuels these scenarios. In *Self Portrait (Gold Leaf Cake)*, the over-accentuated musculature of a foregrounded bicep is ironically set-off by a gauzy ruffle at the bust-line of a strapless black evening gown. While we've seen this tension exploited before—most famously in Mapplethorpe's stagy portraits of body-builder Lisa Lyons—the thick-waisted, bluntly bat eared, grizzle-faced mien chosen here sends it up. Below the buff bicep of the arm bearing the crisply-frosted cake of the title is a motion-blur behind the elbow, indicating the cake's rushed arrival. The husband's head, upside-down and literally disembodied, plummets from the top left edge towards it, as though it was brought to break his fall. Yet the cake is also precipitously tilted toward the picture plane, as if it might soon be propelled at the viewer. In *Self Portrait (Yellow Ball and Squirrel)*, a large, brightly colored beach ball has been launched on a similarly passive-aggressive trajectory toward the picture plane. In both works, such threats read as sly responses to the celebrity-inflected intrusiveness that haunts the contemporary self-portrait genre. This, coupled with the intensity of the figures' stares, makes the viewer keenly conscious of their own voyeuristic gaze.

In the latter image a Minnie-Mouse cartoony hand holds out a proverbially "bright-eyed and bushy-tailed" squirrel, done in a faux-naïf, American-Colonial style. The blend of representational styles challenges the predominant documentary-style verity. Hauptman has spent the better part of the last 15 years scrutinizing herself in the mirror, devoting an average of three months to each image. The payoff is the existential pitch

reached in meticulous, tangible moments—in the glint of dampness under a nostril, the ripple of flesh beneath a perturbed lower lip. Though such technical fluency has long been a noted result of her discipline, as is her effectively sparse use of color, there is no doubt that these latest images represent a quantum leap in Hauptman's playful strategies. Whereas her earlier self-portrait figures tended to sit or stand passively and iconically at attention, these figures are assertively in the process of doing and becoming something cockily self-contradictory.

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