

MARTA KLONOWSKA

“Universal history,” according to Jorge Luis Borges, “is the history of a few metaphors.” In the past few years several of the most interesting artists working in glass have mined the history of art and decorative arts to reveal their metaphorical potential. One need only think of the splendidly opulent dining tables of a Beth Lipman, inspired by seventeenth-century Dutch painting that speak simultaneously of consumption and communion, or the reflectively infinite and yet elusive vessel landscapes of Josiah MacIlhenny addressing issues of utopian worlds and question our beliefs about modernism.

Lesser known as an historical provocateur is the Polish artist Marta Klonowska, who for several years has based her sculptures made of shattered glass on masterpieces of sixteenth- to early nineteenth-century painted portraits by such masters as Francisco de Goya, Diego Velázquez, and Lucas Cranach.

Klonowska studied at the Academy of Fine Arts Wroclaw in Poland, and later at the Academy of Fine Arts in Düsseldorf, Germany under Professor A. R. Penck. She began showing in group-exhibitions in Germany in 1992, and had her first one-person exhibition in Düsseldorf at Galerie Laden 33 in 1996. Since 2003 she has shown at lorch+seidel gallery in Berlin, and in the United States at Art Miami beginning in 2005.

Her series based on old master paintings features figures of dogs and shoes appropriated from the portraits and reconstructed in glass shards, always in a single color, deep cobalt blue, emerald green, or ruby red. The shards are assembled on a metal armature covered with wire gauze. Klonowska’s standard installation of the works includes a digital print of the original painting from which the objects were derived.

These works had their genesis in an even earlier series of glass assemblages in the form of generic shoes, objects taken from daily life. It was her perception of the “theater of life” depicted in these portraits of elegant ladies and gentlemen with their prized pets that intrigued Klonowska. She recognized that these images were of real people, but that their idealization in the portraits removed them from reality at the same time. Likewise, their costume accoutrements and animal friends were both real and unreal simultaneously. The brittle fractured glass used to construct them was seductive to the eye in its rich color, but its texture immediately conveyed a threatening sense of danger to the touch that made them appealing and repellant at the same moment. In the artist’s own words “The dogs are like jewels for the people from these paintings, my animals are the same. They allure the public, but that are not to be possessed. They are dangerous.”

“La Déclaration d’Amour,” by French painter Jean-François de Troy from 1724-25 was the source of a highly animated figure of a dog begging attention from its master standing on two legs, and two pairs of shoes, one women’s and one men’s. The magic that Klonowska achieves in this work is the result of the intense red color of the glass, which at one level looks like precious rubies and on an other suggests the violence of gushing blood. The animal is staged in front of the portrait to suggest that it is seeking attention from the unreal figure in the painting, adding yet another layer of artifice to the theatrical presentation in which Klonowska is interested. Danger and pleasure are inseparable, as are beauty and terror. Klonowska brings the unreal world of real people and animals in paintings into focus, and reminds us that our perceptions of the real are always tempered by our expectations and memories. The history of the painted portrait becomes a metaphor for the theater of daily life that each of us inhabit.

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