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Effeminate ethereality accentuated in ‘Pheromone Hotbox’

By NATALIE MOORE Spectator Senior Staff Writer

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Several women with movie-star hair sit naked around a picnic table in the forest. A woman with skin of a bright yellow hue lies tranquil in a desert. Something that looks like a woman—or a conglomeration of limbs—crawls up over a dark hilltop. All of these women seem to have something in common: They exist in a world free of external menace, and certainly free of men. It’s a world that some might describe as “post-feminist,” a utopia of sorts in a time and a land much different than our own 21st-century New York City.

But it’s actually a photo exhibition at Steven Kasher Gallery in Chelsea. “Pheromone Hotbox” features the work of five female photographers with different, individually tuned aesthetics, but who share a similar overall focus in their work. The scope of the work

STEVEN
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ranges from painted-on photographs of florally-adorned women in fields, to disturbing pale figures contorted in dark corners, to modern girls decked out in bright neons and glossy clear plastic. According to the gallery's press release, the works are intended to "confront post-feminist ideologies."

The term "pheromone hotbox" was developed by one of the show's featured artists, Amanda Charchian.

"The understood biological purpose of pheromones is creation," Charchian said. "In addition to reproduction in the organs, creation manifests itself for the female artist as an expanded conduit for the communication of pheromones between spiritual and material realms."

In this way, the images featured in the show—photographs of women taken by women—are exemplary of this kind of "hotbox" of creative and pheromonic energy.

The five contributing artists—Charchian, Aneta Bartos, Shae Detar, Marianna Rothen, and Olivia Locher—all come from very different backgrounds and have different intentions in creating their work, although the visual common thread that unites the work selected for "Pheromone Hotbox" is undeniable. Each of the featured images builds largely on the base of the classical female form and the artistic nude.

Polish-born photographer Bartos uses Polaroid film to craft haunting, dark environments populated by subjects she calls "ethereal women full of desire and menace." Though many of Bartos' models look physically as though they would be right at home in a French realist painting, her photographs serve as a departure from that soft, idealized female nude. The women of Bartos' work are often shown in strained, spider-like positions or engaging in decidedly "unladylike" behaviour—one work in the show features a tall, wispy blonde standing against a wall in a typically masculine urinating stance, aptly titled "Piss."

STEVEN
KASHER
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“I like to think of them as half-human, half-animal creatures,” Bartos said of her photographic characters. According to Bartos, incorporating both these animalistic and human qualities represents the duality in human nature. “It’s a narcissistic reflection, an alter ego, where two parts of a whole make up separate personalities.”

Though there is a coherent thread through all of her “Pheromone Hotbox” entries, Bartos’ work in the show is the accumulation of several independent projects from throughout her artistic career.

“When Steven [Kasher] asked me to participate in the show with four other women, I proposed to present images from my ‘Spider Monkeys’ series,” Bartos said, referring to her images of women in paired poses that seem like eerie, long-limbed, non-human beings. “Steven thought, however, that ... mixing works from several different projects would convey a broader spectrum of his concept. We both ended up selecting images from three different projects.”

One of these images, entitled “4 Sale,” was actually a collaboration between Bartos and another separate group of female artists, meant to evoke that same idea of Kasher’s vision of a “post-feminist” utopia.

“My aim was to create a self-sufficient, sexually and dangerously charged world of females, completely independent of men and their gaze,” Bartos said.

Meanwhile, the women of Charchian’s photographs often find themselves in bright, technicolor landscapes like deserts, canyons, caves, and forests. Charchian’s work carries hints of retro fashion photography of the 1970s, with long-haired, nymph-like characters roaming free in environments of enhanced artificial bright pinks, oranges, and purples.

Detar’s portraits shares many common themes with Charchian’s work—the ethereal, long-haired nudes, the candy-hued, technicolor environs—though Detar also often incorporates the post-production element of physically painting upon her photographs.

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Detar appropriately describes the resulting visual atmosphere as one of “pre-Raphaelite dreams.” These painted works have a timeless quality about them, as though her vintage-clothed, or unclothed, beauties could have been photographed today or at any point during the 20th century.

Similarly, one might be surprised to learn that any of Rothen’s contributed photos were taken post-1960, least of all in 2013. Rothen’s soft-focused, often black-and-white photographs feature women with a distinct Brigitte Bardot quality about them—beautiful girls in blonde, stylized wigs, vintage garments, and heavy eye makeup—engaging in what she describes as “vague scripted narratives” inspired by the films of the late 60s.

According to gallery owner and show organizer Steven Kasher, these artists’ decisions to incorporate styles such as pre-Raphaelite imagery (a mid-19th-century artistic resurgence of interest in classical and Renaissance styles) and the nouvelle vague (the “French New Wave” of the 1960s) with distinct historical and art historical associations is exemplary of a kind of freedom.

“They use these styles freely, glibly,” he said. “Not as critique, but as resources or ingredients.”

Within the scope of “Pheromone Hotbox,” photographer Locher stands out as the artist with her feet most firmly planted in the present day. Locher’s images have a bright, pop quality, making use of stand-out colors and composition most immediately reminiscent of modern day fashion photography. Locher’s work is also most often staged in a studio setting, incorporating concept and an approach she describes as “sarcastic.” The girls of Locher’s photographs wear brightly colored leotards and pink plastic raincoats and use masking tape as stencils for applying lipstick.

Kasher, when asked about his decision to compile and present the show, said that the work in “Pheromone Hotbox” functions as a kind of positive, self-representative version of female nude or female-body-centric photography.

STEVEN
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“I saw their work as an antidote to Terry Richardson-esque demeaning of women,” he said. “And it seemed to me to be very different from the work of the female photographers that had been grouped together in the show ‘Another Girl, Another Planet’ 15 years ago.”

According to Kasher, the work in “Another Girl, Another Planet”—a show held at the Van Doren Waxter Gallery in 1999—featured art by young women who chose to portray other young women in ways that emphasized insecurity, personal challenge, and confusion. Kasher said that the artists of “Pheromone Hotbox” embody a new generation of images of women by women, without the previously emphasized hardship.

“The characters in these pictures are shown as secure, loving, fearless, and playful,” he said. “They are full of sisterhood, creativity, and sexual control. They celebrate the body and sexuality as if the devouring male gaze is not a problem.”

Kasher said that these images seem to exist in that idealized “post-feminist” world without men, where the battles that women are known to face daily have all been won.

“We can think of many of these images as imagined selfies from a utopian world inhabited by satisfied women,” he said. “I find that to be very beautiful, very moving, and very inspiring to my personal search for liberation and realization. I see these as images of liberation, of freedom from sexual stereotypes that have bound all of us.”

“Pheromone Hotbox” is at the Steven Kasher Gallery until Feb. 28 during regular gallery hours, Tuesday through Saturday, 11 a.m. to 6 p.m.