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Deborah Oropallo @ Stephen Wirtz + Interview

APRIL 6, 2012

"How Can This be Possible?", 2012, a/c on canvas, 80 x 60"

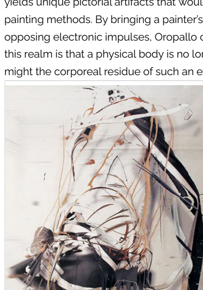
Years ago, when Deborah Oropallo abandoned the brush for the computer, many painters questioned the validity of digital media. Could there be painting without paint? Oropallo answered with a resounding yes. Pioneering new techniques, she created a hybrid form whose look owed little or nothing to photographers and graphic designers, the technology's early adopters.

For the record: Oropallo has never gone all the way digital. *Heroine*, her latest series, includes plenty of actual brush strokes. She applies them to soft-porn photos culled from the Internet, which she electronically transforms into fantastical, dangerous protagonists. Like those in prior series, which featured costumed, bandaged women modeling gas masks and scantily clad rodeo queens gyrating like transparent sex ghosts, the source images for this body of work are repurposed to accommodate Oropallo's interest in placing female superheroes in post-feminist stances – flaunting their sex appeal *and* their power. What's different this time around is that some of them become victims of the sort that fairy tales warn little girls against. As in all such stories, the real subject is power, and in this series, where the subjects are female fencers, it cuts in several directions. While some of Oropallo's characters stand defiantly and strike contemplative or come-hither poses, others lay sprawled on the ground as if mortally wounded. Previously, the artist offered satirical fantasies we could laugh along with. Now, she's turned something of a dark corner. The ethos appears to be that of comics and action movies: kill or be killed, and while you're at it, enjoy a little sex play.

"Not Even You!", 2012, a/c on paper, 38.5 x 50.5"

This, I should point out, is the sensational read, the titillation many viewers probably won't get past. But to my eye, there's a far deeper cultural message embedded in these pictures, and to see it you really have to look at the paintings and how they are built. Their layered construction – and the slippery optical sensations they produce – mirror the both the physical and psychic condition of the virtual life: the fractured, disconnected universe inhabited by millions who spend their waking hours glued to computer screens and smart phones. If you're among them, you probably couldn't care less about these issues. But I predict that years from now, when anthropologists seek to unearth the Zeitgeist of this smutty, over-stimulated era, Oropallo's paintings will be a good source.

Her technique of "pushing pixels" around a computer screen as if they were globules of wet pigment yields unique pictorial artifacts that would be difficult if not impossible to create with conventional painting methods. By bringing a painter's sensibility and skill to a medium where "matter" is defined by opposing electronic impulses, Oropallo creates visions of a universe devoid of matter. A key feature of this realm is that a physical body is no longer required to conduct basic human transactions. What might the corporeal residue of such an existence look like?



"Don't Believe Me?", 2012, a/c on canvas, 64 x 49"

In Oropallo's hands, "bodies" are both vivid and vaporous, defined by bright colors, jagged contours, shadows and dots that, when built up in layers, constitute something a lot like the Internet itself: a tantalizing, yet empty, place.

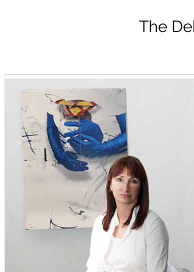
All of the works in this series exhibit this quality, but the one that embodies it best is *Don't Believe Me.* In it, Oropallo dissolves the model's upper body and shreds her clothing; it flaps in a virtual "breeze". Her thighs and buttocks are clearly delineated in the foreground, but her torso exists more as wisps of shadow than actual line, shape and mass. What lines we do see are jagged and pixelated – like those that appear on your TV screen when the cable signal goes on the fritz. It's a perfect device for representing the elusive nature of the online experience and for signaling artist's back-and-forth shift between electronic and conventional painting. The effect is enhanced by clinical lighting and by the overlay of Lichtenstein-like dots; they create an Op-ish sense of spatial dislocation and surface tension. There is also a strong link to Hans Bellmer, the German Surrealist, famous for his kinky bandaged dolls. Clad in Wonderwoman's trademark gloves and leggings, they make for strange, potent historical mash-ups whose meaning is as wide-open as the Internet itself.

To gain insight into Oropallo's process and thinking, I put some questions to the artist, which she answered in the email exchange below.

–DAVID M. ROTH

Deborah Oropallo: "Heroine" @ Stephen Wirtz Gallery through April 21, 2012.

The Deborah Oropallo Interview



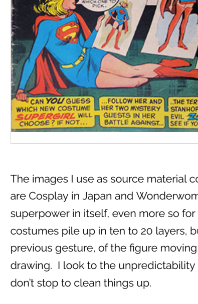
The artist in her Berkeley studio

David M. Roth: What attracted you to digital painting and what unique abilities did it give you?

Deborah Oropallo: Programs like Photoshop and Painter allow me to work in layers and experiment with many possible manipulations of color, hue, transparency and opacity. One of the biggest advantages is that you can reverse your actions by going back and forth in time with "History". It makes me feel like more of a risk taker than I really am. I can work faster and not linger too long. What I appreciate most is the element of surprise. It keeps me interested because I can't control the medium completely. If I ask the computer to remove a certain color by varying degrees, I never know what pixels will be left behind. Randomly turning off layers is another method I use to avoid my own intentions. Instead of building an image, it's more a process of removal. The computer allows me to find or distort an image in a way that would be impossible to replicate otherwise. Still, whether I'm using a brush, a camera, a printer or a computer, *painting* is still the dialogue in my head.

DMR: Can you explain how you transform your source images into finished pictures?

DO: I layer multiple images of costumed girls getting dressed and undressed in superhero attire. The process mimics the layering of clothing, which over time becomes animated and disjointed, so that they seem to be struggling to get in and out of their costume fantasy, leaving one persona and becoming another. It is not so much about escape as it is transformation. The "struggle" I think is a kind of metaphor for how women in the media have been portrayed in the pre- and post-feminist eras. Since the beginning of the comic book industry in 1940s, female superheroes have searched for identity on a broader scale, and that search basically tracks the battle for equality. It's taken on numerous guises: eroticized and deified female characters, some of which are funny, dramatic, excessive, tragic, masked and exposed.

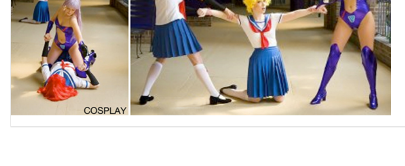


The images I use as source material come from different Internet sites. Some of the more popular ones are Cosplay in Japan and Wonderwoman. In both cases the sexual element is exaggerated as a superpower in itself, even more so for the Japanese. As I remove body parts, limbs and faces, the costumes pile up in ten to 20 layers, but the program leaves bits of pixels remaining, like a memory or previous gesture, of the figure moving, which also happens to appear like paint or in some cases drawing. I look to the unpredictability of this process and let it leave traces of the pixels left behind. I don't stop to clean things up.

DMR: Your compositions bring together many elements: shadows that define body parts, long lines of "shattered" pixels, Op-ish dots of varying diameters that you use to create pictorial depth; gestural swaths that you've applied with paint and brush; and for the first time, I think, architectural space: rooms in which your figures appear. Tell us some of the considerations you weigh when you put these elements together.

DO: I prepare canvases in my studio, placing washes where I imagine figures will be, so the shadows are painted first. When the computer manipulation is finally complete, I take a disc with the image still in layers to Magnolia Editions and I start to print the image. Since it is a flat bed printer, not a roll, I can interrupt layers, by painting over things and by sending new layers from the computer. This gives me the option to change my mind on the spot as I watch the picture being printed. If something still isn't quite right, I can take it pack to the studio and paint over it. I love the variation of working this way, the hard graphic details of the pixels in combination with the soft focus abilities, motion blurs, and washes that this shifting, between digital printing and hand painting, makes possible. The Internet images, the computer, the program, the paint and the printer each add more to the process than I could do on my own.

As for the architectural part, I was getting tired of the white backgrounds that I had in my previous body of work. So off of the internet I selected white rooms, altered them and then made them soft focus so they would merely suggest a room or a place, with only slight architectural signifiers, while still remaining white. I also de-saturated the color of the costumes to give the pictures the look of an old-world comic. Something I heard on NPR when they made *Captain America.*



DMR: Let's talk about content. You've used digital cut-and-paste methods to explore and blur gender roles and transform images of female superheroes. In the current series you do similar things. You've talked about this in feminist terms, about giving women power. Can you speak about that?

DO: I looked at Wonderwoman, our first female superhero, from the beginning of her first costume sketch. By the way: I think it's important to note that it was mostly white males who depicted women in comics right up until the 70's. During the 40's they resembled the pin-up girls that were intended for soldiers. In 1954 the "comic code" went into effect and it specified how women could or should not be portrayed. It was revised in the '70's and eliminated only last year. It now looks much like the 40's all over again. So each decade, depending on where feminism was, or whether the comic code was in force, or whether it was a man or woman drawing, the costumes changed accordingly. As my work evolved I began to think that the women I depict function as metaphors for the struggle in the comic industry, the music industry, pop culture and the fashion industry, all of which have shifted. Our celebrities have become the new superheroes and, quite interestingly, they've come to look more like cartoons.

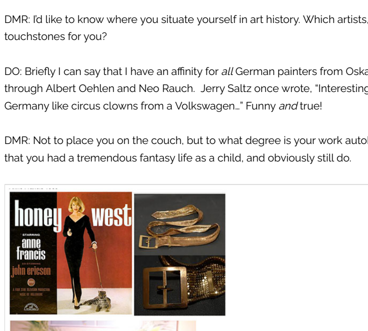
Oropallo often takes titles the titles for her paintings from cartoon dialog

DMR: When I look at the current works, the power equation is not always clear: you appear to give power *and* take it away. For example, with the fencers, the subject of this series, some of the women are clearly in control. Others are not. Some look freshly wounded, others highly vulnerable. The titles ("This Can't be Happening!" "What Have You Done?" "How Can This be Possible") are also, I think, very telling. They suggest that the subjects are resisting something unpleasant. Then, there are others that strike back with implied threats ("Don't Believe Me?", "This is Just the Beginning") and with body language to match. It seems as if your women are equal parts superhero/sex object and unwilling victim.

DO: That is true. I pulled these titles directly off the comic cells of girls battling on the Internet. And this is where the pictures themselves raise the questions you ask: are they about fighting crime, bad guys, soft porn, bad girls, cat fights, girl hero against girl hero, seduction, fantasy and so forth? In the comic industry they could never figure out if Superwoman should be a bored housewife, a debutante, a lesbian a feminist, or a student living with her parents. They couldn't even figure out what her REAL life identity should be.

DMR: If a man were to put on display work that looked like yours, I imagine the reaction from women would not be positive. I can see charges of exploitation flying fast and furious.

DO: Men *did* make these drawings of women up until the 70's! According to Mike Madrid who wrote "Supergirls, Fashion, Feminism, Fantasy, and the History of Comic book heroines", when woman writers were sending a strong message of resistance to the big comic book publishing companies, a collective of women creators from Berkeley created "It Ain't Me Babe". In it, they used humor to blast the comic book industry for their sexual attitudes and job discrimination. It then prompted the collective to publish a magazine called *Wimmens's Comix.* So to answer your question, it wasn't fast and furious — it took decades.

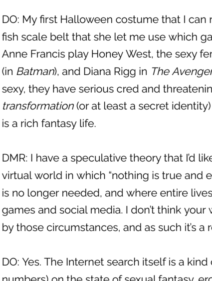


"Naughty" nurse attire available online

DMR: I'd like to know where you situate yourself in art history. Which artists, past or present, are touchstones for you?

DO: Briefly I can say that I have an affinity for *all* German painters from Oskar Kokoschka going forward through Albert Oehlen and Neo Rauch. Jerry Saltz once wrote, "Interesting artists seem to pop out of Germany like circus clowns from a Volkswagen..." Funny *and* true!

DMR: Not to place you on the couch, but to what degree is your work autobiographical? My guess is that you had a tremendous fantasy life as a child, and obviously still do.

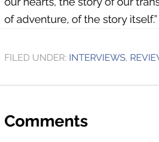


Below: Lee Meriwether as she appeared in "Batman" circa: 1966

DO: My first Halloween costume that I can remember was Catwoman. My mother had this great gold, fish scale belt that she let me use which gave me all the power I needed. At nine, I loved watching Anne Francis play Honey West, the sexy female detective with an ocelot and a pistol, Lee Meriwether (in *Batman*), and Diana Rigg in *The Avengers.* I saw these woman and thought: They work, they are sexy, they have serious cred and threatening abilities. It was not about escape as much as *transformation* (or at least a secret identity) that I dreamed of. Risk taking is essential for any artist. So is a rich fantasy life.

DMR: I have a speculative theory that I'd like to test. It goes like this. I see your work as emblematic of a virtual world in which "nothing is true and everything is permitted," a world where a corporeal presence is no longer needed, and where entire lives can be constructed and lived out electronically through games and social media. I don't think your work is necessarily *about* that reality, but it's made possible by those circumstances, and as such it's a reflection of those underlying conditions.

DO: Yes. The Internet search itself is a kind of archeological dig and a true reflection (by dint of sheer numbers) on the state of sexual fantasy, erotic behavior, pop culture, desire and the rampant nature of the beast that is the World Wide Web.



Right: Lady Gaga in Vogue Japan

DMR: What questions haven't I asked that you wish I *had* asked?

DO: You have asked more questions about this work than I could ever imagine. But there is something I would like to add. It's a quote from Michael Chabon from *Secret Skin: An Essay in Unitard Theory.* "Superheroism is a kind of transvestism; our superdrag serves at once to obscure the exterior self that no longer defines us while betraying, with half unconscious panache, the truth of the story we carry in our hearts, the story of our transformation, of our story's recommencement, of our rebirth into the world of adventure, of the story itself."

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Comments

Mary Hull Webster says
APRIL 12, 2012 AT 6:32 PM

A most interesting review. I haven't seen the show, but the conversation grabs me.

I think what you both are circling around has to do with, in large part, the transformational questioning of reality that Cindy Sherman set a generation ago–and the archetypal content choices of Andy Warhol; he instinctively saw that pop celebrities carry power because they enact archetypal energies washing through cultural periods. These two progenitors gave us images, much as movies and music do, on which to ride into the expansiveness suggested in Roth's virtual reality comment that "nothing is true and everything is permitted." If the image manages to convince the viewer, then she accepts, particularly unconsciously, that it is real. The image that can get into the mind is more important than its objecthood. And Oropallo is good at making convincing images.

What, for me, is not transformative is her use of materials entirely in the pursuit of power. There is a joyless, metallic quality in the images, a cold view of the world that calculates variants within dominant and victim behavior. Her defense could be that this is how the world works. But real transformation–at least for this viewer–would involve revelation that feeds cultural change, and maybe compassion and love that could work in tension with the will to power that robs Peter to pay Paul.

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