

A Brush with Celebrity: Reflections on *In Reverie, In Sympathy* By Nadia Kurd

In his influential book *Ways of Seeing* (1973), John Berger writes that “a woman must continually watch herself...so [that] she comes to consider the surveyor and the surveyed within her as two constituent yet always distinct elements of her identity as a woman.”¹ Berger argues that as a result of societal expectations and norms, women have been conditioned to be aware that they are being looked upon and evaluated by the male viewer. More importantly, that in conjunction with the male gaze, the act of looking is also maintained and facilitated by women in regards to their own appearance in order to maintain a sense of appeal. As the demand for images, especially of celebrity women grows, we see all too often the ways in which clothing, body size and gestures are used as fodder for the media’s consuming gaze. Such images have not only saturated the Internet via blogs, websites, television and various forms of print media, but they have also been subject to intense analysis and debate.

Despite the 35 years that have lapsed since Berger’s book, the relevancy of “the gaze” has not ceased to work its way into the understanding of works of art. Emily Bennett Beck’s exhibition titled *In Reverie, In Sympathy* shows precisely how women continue to be the object of the gaze in our contemporary moment. Bright and eye catching with a touch of pastiche, Bennett Beck’s portraits of celebrity women presents the viewer with images of personas that, at first glance, can be characterized as iconic, femme fatales, even starlets. However, upon closer inspection the bright pastels combined with sombre expressions in the portraits describe the fallibility of such relentless looking. Either pursued by the paparazzi or being the subject of tabloid scrutiny, these women become spectacles themselves as no moment or action of their lives goes unrecorded in the public eye. Bennett Beck challenges this process of intense looking by focusing on the moments when the individual appears to be the most vulnerable; through the smeared lipstick on the face, the glazed eyes and the surrealistic flow of hair the viewer becomes aware of not only the intersections of femininity and painting, but also of the emotional spaces these women inhabit.

While these portraits capture the gloss and hype surrounding the celebrity, Bennett Beck focuses on the ways in which women are used in images, and the social roles these women play. She states that “images of women often become accepted substitutes for definitive descriptions of character. I have always seen the image, in general, as both a situational summary as well as a plentiful and fertile stand-in for verbal description.”² That is, images of women can convey multiple meanings and are presented as ideal personas to give the viewer cues to a number of set social norms. However, whether or not we accept these social cues is also highly contestable; while the kind of celebrity women Bennett Beck depicts are idolized, they are also quickly brought down by the very same means used to promote them.

This cycle of pursuit is disrupted in the exhibition *In Reverie, In Sympathy*. What makes Bennett Beck's work striking is that the emphasis is not on the way women reciprocate the gaze but on the tension that arises when our expectations of the subject to be desirable are unmet. It is with a painterly reverence and sympathy that these images work to counter media depictions. This also allows the viewer reflection on his or her position as a surveyor of such images. In other words, Bennett Beck's paintings are pictures about pictures; they highlight the ways images circulate, and gauge our ability to identify a subject as an object of beauty. Paintings such as *Hillary Defeated*, *A Virgin Mourning*, and *Jane Austen in Red Gloves* not only describe the multiplicity of meaning that images can convey, but also evoke specific moments in time when the actions or antics have implicated the subject in public. We recognize these moments in particular because of the ubiquitous ways these images are presented; they also describe our own roles as consumers of images.

In Reverie, In Sympathy asks the audience to re-examine the act of looking. By focusing on the mode of portraiture, Bennett Beck reframes the ways we understand how women are depicted and understood. These moments reveal the complexity and intersection of celebrity, femininity and the mediums that convey these tropes. It is from this starting point that Emily Bennett Beck's work transgresses the conventions of the gaze, as articulated by Berger, and reminds us that looking is not just about how women conform to the gaze, but also about the ways in which we as consumers of pictures continue to demand such images.

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¹ Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*. Penguin Group: London, 1973. (46)

² Bennett Beck, Emily. Artist Statement, www.emilybennettbeck.com (Accessed September 20, 2008).

This text is part of a writing series by members of the gallery, reflecting on the works presented during articule's 2008-2009 programming season. Nadia Kurd's text has been produced for Emily Bennett Beck's exhibition *In Reverie, In Sympathy*, presented from October 3 to November 2, 2008, and is also available as a pdf on the gallery's web site.

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