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Playing with Perspective

ART DIALOGUE

Peter and Lucia Simek discuss the group show *Femme Fatale* at Holly Johnson Gallery, featuring the work of five female artists: Virginia Fleck, Sharon Louden, Kim Cadmus Owens, Kim Squaglia, and Sarah Walker.

By [Lucia and Peter Simek](#) June 19, 2009

The group show *Femme Fatale*, which opened June 12 at the [Holly Johnson Gallery](#), gathers the work of five female artists: Virginia Fleck, Sharon Louden, Kim Cadmus Owens, Kim Squaglia, and Sarah Walker.

Peter Simek: At Holly Johnson's show *Femme Fatale*, I moved through the gallery rather quickly, was amused by the great balloon in the back room, grabbed a cup of wine, and examined the exquisite craftsmanship of Kim Squaglia's glassy resin works; but it wasn't until I made my way back to the front of the gallery that I really got caught up in a work. The piece was Virginia Fleck's *Makeover Mandala* in the front window.

Like Fleck's other pieces in the show this circular work was pieced together with scraps of bags; but unlike some of her other stuff, there were other plastic cut outs arranged in a pinwheel-like pattern around the work. The cut-out images were My Little Ponies, Cat Woman, and other girlish child characters. The collection and repetition of these characters had an interesting effect. It was like a sudden bombardment with a heap of girlish femininity, the objects all being the kinds of images in popular culture that define the feminine to young girls. It was whimsical and funny. But I also couldn't help but notice how overtly sexual all of these childhood characters were – even the My Little Ponies with their big, batting eyes and flowing California hair. The piece, I think, was getting at that delicate balance in female sexuality – the way it can empower and objectify; the innate danger in sexuality (potential consequences of unleashed sexuality – pregnancy, disease) and something that is silly and laughable about being sexy.



The Dream That Dreamed Me with *Hub Mandala* by Virginia Fleck

Lucia Simek: Right — what was so good about these mandalas of Fleck's was the great way they conveyed a sense of playfulness, but also an undercurrent of the odd power of commodity, and the tangled relationship between objectivity of women and the real thing. The mandala is a really interesting tool to get these ideas across: it's a design traditionally used to consider or meditate on particular spiritual questions, none of which I know in any depth, unfortunately. But, know them or not, the hypnotic, kaleidoscopic patterns Fleck makes in these pieces by using throw-away bags and retro girl icons, creates a kind of highly designed study in girliness and all the clichés and traps that females can get caught up in by their own will or by the force of others. By using these images Fleck really seems to be making a comment on what girls and the women that raise them let influence their own sense of center, to play with the image of the mandala here. She's pointing to a skewed vision.

Virginia Fleck's large inflated pillow (that you think looked like a balloon) called *The Dream Dreamed Me* in the main gallery is just delightful to

look at. It's buoyant, with thread tassels hanging from the sides. It's a hyperbolic riff on female material dreams and fantasies, made from scads of shopping bags and filled with hot air. It's a lovely and hilarious image to think of trying to rest your head on this thing, and a strong metaphor for women's propensity (and I'm generalizing here) to lay their head on stuff that's ultimately empty.

PS: I also liked how it moved as people in the gallery moved around it. But I don't want to forget Kim Squaglia's works here. Each piece was built up on a wood base with resin, and to each resin layer, Squaglia adds lines of paint. This process is repeated an almost masochistic number of times until the canvas is a few inches thick, and some of the painted lines recede deep into the resin layers, while others remain close to the surface. There is a sense of formal unity to the work as a whole, all the more impressive since each element of this form is added independent of corresponding lines and squiggles. But I particularly loved the dialogue between the layers — the way when you got up close to the work you could see lines that at first seemed to overlap didn't really touch at all, separated by resin layers, some only millimeters apart. I found this tense delicate play very moving. It was like the painted lines were longing for each other.

LS: Come hither, sweet line....

PS: Similar to Squaglia's stuff, Sharon Louden's small white canvas *The Lingering* portrayed a similar delicate beauty. The little squiggles of paint on the plain white canvass were so Japanese, so simple and lovely.

LS: This one was my favorite in the show, especially in light of the show title *Femme Fatale*, which connotes a kind manipulative ferocity in women, or a strength that's highly sexed. But this piece by Louden was utterly quiet, and meticulously crafted – the white paint on the wood was flawlessly applied so not a brushstroke was evident. It spoke about a kind of femininity that's not often lauded in contemporary art, dare I say as much. The sort of feminine *The Lingering* suggested was one of restraint and grace, with its only marks being loose and liquidly orange strokes in the upper left corner on this sea of perfect white. The whole thing leaves you longing for something, leaves you wondering. To my mind, those qualities are what can make women so powerful: a sense of mystery.