

ARTINFO

February 24, 2012

Enter Through the Gift Shop: A Q&A With Ellen Harvey About Her Nudist Museum at DODGEgallery

By Jill Feldman

Ellen Harvey's *The Nudist Museum Gift shop* is on view in New York's DODGEgallery from February 23 through April 1. The installation features dozens of paintings of decorative consumer objects that are somehow ornamented with nudes, such as a penknife accented with naked women, as well as a series of works that recreate every nude postcard available at a museum gift shop in New York City's five boroughs. Harvey's exhibition will also include *The Nudist Museum*, which began as a commission for the Bass Museum, in Miami. Jill Feldman spoke with the artist about the works in the exhibition and her attitude toward nudity, art, and the gift shop.

Can you tell me about the works in the show? What is *The Nudist Museum*?

Sure. It's a very mad, self-indulgent piece in the sense that as a child, I always loved going to museums because of all the nudity. I was very fond of naked people. I am very fond of naked people. I've made a lot of different museum works in my time. Most of them are under the category of the "Museum of Failure."

The nude is obviously one of the great clichés of art production; you know when you were a teenager you were like, "Oh you're gonna go to figure drawing class...cool!" So I thought it would be fun to do a project that was a bit about that. There are basically two components to the show: the first part is *The Nudist Museum* which is actually a collection of 54 paintings where I painted by hand of every single nude in the Bass Museum collection in Miami Beach, Florida. To be honest with you it's sort of random—it's from the medieval to the present—each painting was made based on a documentation the museum provided; it's cropped so you can only see the nudes, which are placed in thrift store frames, and everything other than the nudes is painted in black and white, and then the painting continues onto the frame. So the idea is that when you see it, you first thought is, "Oh it's a collection of old paintings"; your second thought is, "Wait a second, why are they all the same color?"; and then you're like, "Why is the painting going over onto the frames?" And you start to get a sense that perhaps it's actually something else.

At the gallery, *The Nudist Museum* is hung on the bottom part, and you go into the museum and there's the smaller part—that is going to have shelves—which will be the Gift Shop. I thought any self-respecting museum must have a gift shop. So that is going to be a whole series of paintings of decorative objects that have or are decorated with nudes. It sets up this conversation between applied arts and the fine arts, which I think is sort of a ludicrous distinction—but an interesting one. So you have these sort of decorative art objects that now become fine art objects. But they're all painted; they're painted so they look kind of like the sort of art sold on eBay.

It's really about creating a very light-hearted museum experience—but hopefully it will make you think a little bit about the relationship of the gift shop to the museum and why is it that the things from the museum that are in the gift shop are the ones you think of much less.



And hopefully, people will come away having thought about this cliché of nudity in a slightly different way. Why people traditionally associate artists with models and with nudity. That obviously is a cliché of art production that's not really that true for most artists nowadays but it still lives on in the popular mind—what does that tell you about what people think art is. I think it has a lot to do with a space for desire. That people think of art as a social space where desires can be fulfilled, and that space of desire is all about nudity!

When you go to a museum, you expect to have a certain kind of experience, but the gift shop kind of applies more to the outside world just in the way that you can take home a piece of the museum with you...

It's this sort of idea that you can't have the things that you most long for, which are the objects inside the museum, but you can have these other little things. They're not as good, but you can have them so that's sort of the case where your desire can be fulfilled—except, of course, it isn't. But that's the nature of desire. And that's been a real interest of mine all along, the impossibility of satisfying desire and the way in which art functions in that way.

When you talk about seducing viewers into thinking in your works, are you guiding them toward something? How much do you leave kind of hidden or more subtle?

I feel that honestly, whatever response anyone has is completely valid. I'm not interested in provoking a particular response. I do feel a responsibility to have the artwork include as much information as could be helpful for the viewer or could be fun for him or her—you know, most people won't even notice that, they might be like, "Oh, it's a collection of thrift store paintings." But if you look more carefully you might say, "Wait a second, what's—is there something else?" I feel strongly that I don't really like making didactic press releases, I particularly don't like wall texts; I feel that everything that a viewer might wish to know about the piece should be visible in the piece.