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THE NUDIST MUSEUM GIFT SHOP: ELLEN HARVEY

February 23 – April 1, 2012

Reception: Thursday, February 23, 6-8pm



A museum is nothing without a gift shop. A museum without nudes is really no fun at all. This the best of all worlds: a museum attached to a gift shop with nothing but nudes.

In her inaugural exhibition at DODGEgallery, Ellen Harvey offers several strangely beautiful and hilarious explorations of the art nude that both question and exploit our fascination with depictions of our naked bodies to create an intentionally contradictory and often incoherent model of art as a form of desire.

These works which are part of Harvey's ongoing *Museum of Failure*, explore the paradox that at a time when no one need resort to figure drawing classes to see naked members of either sex, the popular imagination still clings to the nude as one of the great subjects of art. Harvey's work suggests that this vestigial desire for artistic nudity is more than a mere longing for the canon but that it conflates the art object's function as an object of desire with the more obvious desires of the body. Nudity seems the natural adornment of a social space of unbridled license and incongruous innocence at the same time that these utterly objectified subjects remain ultimately frustrating; a painted nude can never reciprocate the viewer's affections any more than it can act in any other way. Nudes are as powerless and exasperating as they are alluring. Much like all art, they promise much but deliver only an aching longing for action. Desire is doomed to remain unfulfilled and attempts at fulfillment result in as much bathos as pathos.

This anticlimactic collapse of desire is most vividly revealed in the dingy *Nudist Museum Gift Shop* which consists of a series of paintings of nude design objects found on eBay and in junk shops ranging from the predictable nude lady ashtrays to the truly peculiar. Here the distinction between the applied and the fine arts disintegrates; in some cases, such as Venus de Milo salt and pepper shakers and Leonardo's *Vesuvian Man* belt buckle, abducted art nudes are reinserted into the world of art; in others, objects such as the lowly titty mug are afforded an entirely new and incongruous glamour. Here the gift shop exists not only to support but to usurp the museum in a gesture that makes explicit both the gallery's function as a shop and as a creator of museum-like value. Only the arrangement of paintings by object category, and their display on a shelf running the length of the upstairs gallery undercut the objects' self-proclaimed new status as art.

Because no gift shop would be complete without postcards, the accompanying *New York City Nudes* consists of every nude postcard currently on offer in the art museums of New York City modified by the artist to show only the human bodies depicted therein, creating an overview of the nude art canon of our city.

Harvey's *Missing Bits*, watercolors of pornography painted on oval mats, effectively remove all hint of the originals' subject matter. Here nudity reverts to pure physical desire save that the subject of each work is required to be supplied by the viewer; private desires for a private space. The accompanying *Self-Loathing Mirrors*, housed in the gallery's bathroom, mirrors that have been scratched out so that they no longer provide an accurate image of the viewer provide a welcome respite from a harshly judgmental culture of physical perfection.

The Nudist Museum provides a more extensive overview of the strange and varied forms of art historical nudity here placed in explicit contrast to the monotonously sexualized mass media nudity of our times. The museum's collection consists of 54 paintings based on documentation of every single nude (painting & sculpture) in the collection of the Bass Museum of Art, providing an idiosyncratic overview of nudity in Western art from the Middle Ages to the present day as collected by one institution. The source images are cropped to accentuate the nudes and scaled to fit the random grouping of thrift store frames in which they are hung. All nudity is painted in flesh tone (regardless of the color of original) and everything else is painted in monochrome with the paint spilling out onto the thrift store frames to signal that these apparently old paintings are not what they seem. The paintings are hung over a wallpaper of magazine pages, both obscuring and revealing the highly sexualized and frequently pornographic nudity of today's print media to create an alternately seductive and frustrating dialog between past and present. On the opposite wall, *Venus vs. St. Sebastian* plays out the eternal conflict between the desires of the flesh and the desires of the spirit. Hardly surprisingly, Venus appears to be winning. . .

For further information about the exhibition please contact Patton Hindle at patton@dodge-gallery.com or +1 212-228-5122

*Ellen Harvey lives and works in Brooklyn, NY. Born in the United Kingdom, Harvey received her BA and MA from Harvard in 1989 and her JD from Yale in 1993. Harvey participated in the Whitney Independent Study Program in New York from 1998 to 1999. Her work has been exhibited in public institutions including The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY; Sculpture Center, Long Island City, NY; PS1 Museum, Long Island City, NY; Bass Museum, Miami, FL; Turner Contemporary, Margate, England; Roger Raveel Museum, Machelen aan de Leie, Belgium; Queens Museum of Art, Queens, NY; Wave Hill, Bronx, NY; Institute of Contemporary Art, London, England; Institute of Contemporary Art, Philadelphia, PA; Brooklyn Museum of Art, Brooklyn, NY. She has completed public projects for both the New York and Chicago Transit Authorities, and is currently working on commissions for New York's Percent for Art and the Federal Government. Her work is in the collections of Fidelity Investments, Hammer Museum, Neuberger & Berman, The Progressive Collection, Queens Museum of Art, Whitney Museum of American Art, The West Collection, and the Gwangju Art Museum. Harvey's work has been reviewed in Artforum, Art in America, The New York Times, Artinfo, Art News, Frieze and Flash Art, to name a few. A comprehensive monograph *Ellen Harvey: The Museum of Failure* will be published by Gregory Miller this year.*

Founded in April 2010 by Kristen Dodge, DODGE gallery is a contemporary art gallery located on the Lower East Side. The gallery is run by Kristen Dodge, Founder/Director, and Patton Hindle, Director of Operations. Housed in a 2,500 sq/ft former sausage factory, the gallery opened to the public on September 10, 2010. The program combines early-career and mid-career artists, often featuring two concurrent exhibitions. Artists on the gallery roster include Rebecca Chamberlain, Dave Cole, Environmental Services, Darren Foote, Ted Gahl, Sheila Gallagher, Jason Middlebrook, Daniel Phillips, and Lorna Williams. For more information please visit dodge-gallery.com

Image: *The Nudist Museum*, 2010, oil on gesso board, dimensions variable. Photograph: Jan Baracz