

Sara Kahana

Paintings – Holding

In 1917, Herwarth Walden provided a concise definition for Expressionist art, remarking that it was not an "exterior" impression but rather an "expression" whose source was on the "interior." Walden's definition may well be used to refer to the spirit that pervades Sara Kahana's paintings, and which is characterized by the desire to give expression to the process of self examination.

Sara Kahana's works have grown out of the tradition of modern expressionism in the style of Edvard Munch, of Haim Soutine and of the women painted by de Kooning. Her works may also be associated with the naïve imagery and formal traits of Jean Dubuffet's work; with the examination of female beauty in the work of Marlene Dumas; and with the sensual, organic forms of Pinchas Zinovich .Kahana's works continue to evolve into a profound form of painterly expression, whose contents and form are both refreshing and powerful. The paintings that were created during the years 2004–2007 are being exhibited, for the first time, in this solo exhibition.

Kahana creates female figures that cling to the reality revealed to them as they gaze at their own reflections. At times this reality is imposed upon the female figure, and at times she is the one who controls it. The potential embedded in facing one's own reflection enables the artist to raise and shake the figures; to dig into their bodies; to knead them into a thick paste or to melt them; to undo their balance, and to challenge it with points of support that are related to different states of consciousness. The formal elements in these paintings create a rich and intense experience – while the precise and energetic lines, figurative distortion, variegated materiality and use of bright, sometimes even garish colors point to a virtuosic ability to represent the figures and what they attempt to express.

Kahana examines the body, scanning it from every possible direction. Concepts such as "external" and "internal" beauty are confronted with one another, and are fused to the point of Kafkaesque ridicule with ugliness, monstrosity and "anatomical beauty." All these are described in great detail, almost as if they were x-rays: a skeleton, internal organs, secretions, wounds, penetrated areas and ruptured surfaces, clothing details, hairstyles, expressions and gestures.

The subject of these paintings is reminiscent of the genre of "women looking in a mirror," which forms an integral part of the tradition of Western art. The long and narrow format (80x160 cm) is reminiscent of the dimensions of a bedroom or bathroom mirror. Kahana also uses a wider format (130x160 cm), which is still relatively compatible with the dimensions of the body. At the same time, each format offers different possibilities for the representation of the female image.

The figures seem to be reflected in the mirror / canvas as icons of their own selfhood, and exist in relation to changing internal and external states. In some works, they seem to be simultaneously aware both of their external appearance and of their status as objects that are being observed. Their facial expressions, hand gestures and body language all serve to manipulate the viewer. Kahana explains: "At times the figure is a child-woman who is using her aggressive colors to seduce the viewer to observe her, and at times she faces him helplessly." In other works, the woman is focused exclusively on herself, and on the internal activity taking place within her body. She is presented as a blocked, introverted, distant and emptied out object, while her skeletal structure – with its watery, diluted materiality – is absorbed into the canvas like a Rorschach inkblot.

The women in Kahana's works are highly expressive. They are revealed as fragile and sometimes even mad; they struggle with internal chaos, or grow dizzy as they succumb to invisible whirlpools. Their diagonally leaning bodies

seem about to exceed the limits of the compositional frame, yet are surprisingly able to maintain their balance.

Although Munch's "scream" has left a deep imprint upon these paintings, it is no longer a fragile, melancholy and anxious cry; rather, it clings to life.

Urges and desires survive despite the destruction of both the face and the body. The mouth is painted in various shades of red, black and white; it seems to have alighted suddenly, like an independent creature, upon the crushed, effaced and distorted face – confronting the power of life and representing the body's urge to be loved.

The figures' hand gestures are just as powerfully expressive as their faces. In some works, the hands seem to be grabbing onto, or to be grabbed by, the body – while in other paintings they are at a removal from the body, yet still hold on to the frame of the canvas or to their clothes. As Kahana explains, "At times the hands attempt to stop, push away, save, protect, contain, organize and prevent the chaotic, condensed plenitude from bursting out; they try to restore it to its traditional place. In other instances the hands dig into the abdomen as if to pull out 'interiority' itself, to give birth to it and free it into the world. Sometimes they are mired within tangled internal organs. Or else they are outside the body, completely absent from its interior."

One of the variations on these female figures is "The Crinoline Woman," who serves as a central "archetype"; she is depicted as a woman-child, and is put on display in a voluminous skirt; at times she is coated like a marzipan cake, and in other instances she is exhibited as nothing but a skeletal outline. Her accessories play a central role in her appearance, and they are characterized by a garish green and pinkish-red palette. In several works, the face of "The Crinoline Woman" – which seems to have been borrowed from one of the cartoon figures in the "Looney Toons" – offers an antithesis to the distorted faces in other works, which smile scornfully at both themselves and at the viewer.

As she continues to develop, "The Crinoline Woman" falls apart and is rebuilt as a "multidimensional woman" whose vitality, feelings and emotions are expressed by means of her material and formal makeup.

What characterizes Kahana's women, and amounts to a refreshing and powerful statement, is that their "external appearance" is fused with their anatomical, "internal appearance." According to Kahana, "My self-criticism concerning the lack of clarity that characterizes my status as a contemporary woman is metaphorically expressed in the ambivalent manner in which the internal organs, skeleton, head, chest, face and hands function. This process is imbued with self-directed irony, and unfolds under the cover of weakness and vulnerability."

-- Shirley Meshulam, Curator