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Flash Art

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JEFF KOONS, ITALIAN WOMAN, 1986.
STAINLESS STEEL, 30" x 18" x 11". COURTESY SONNABEND GALLERY, NEW YORK. PHOTO FRED SCRUTON.

JULIE WACHTEL

Robert Nickas: *I've referred to our current perverse sense of time as the ever-present now-the eroticized frozen moment. Your work seems to be conscious of something like this, to be blatantly suggestive of it as problematic.*

Julie Wachtel: Yes. I believe one of the residual effects of this hyperstate "present" is the disappearance of the historical. The past is constantly being erased by the perpetual flow of the movement. Information is transmitted as an ever-present foreground. There is no background. We find ourselves before this flow of undifferentiated "moments" which are presented as natural and outside history, and it is only here through our identification with this flow that we are meant to feel real.

RN: *Which in your paintings compels us to look upon two radically different images simultaneously.*

JW: I think of my work as freezing a very small section of this flow and presenting it as an object for scrutiny. I am trying to bring attention to those seams between images that the media presents as invisible- as seamless. I believe that this seamless flow functions libidinally and is thus very successful in producing spectators in a position of fixation before it. My work is about that point of contact between different representations, each announcing their presence in unison, with equal volume, equal weight, equal importance.

RN: *Of these images, what specifically interests you in these greeting cards? They aren't exactly the kind one would be pleased to receive or, for that matter, think to send- not that the more traditional or "normal" cards are any less*

disturbing in how they express sentiment.

JW: The greeting cards I select literally convey anxiety- fear of being stupid, of being poor, of being ugly, of being unable to express oneself. We are overinvested in the cult of personality gone awry. They are representative of the middle and lower classes and suggest, I believe, a position of impotency within the greater social field. For me the use of the cards works to fight against a problematic and romantic notion of an emotionality independent of the social relations of which it is inextricably a part.

RN: *And the images of primitive objects?*

JW: When I first started this body of work three years ago I was only working with cartoon images. I soon realized that there was a risk that they would not be perceived as sincere, so I decided I needed something that somehow represented authenticity of emotion. I first started out with images of American folk art. It functioned as a sign for the naive, for the unsocialized emotions. This led me to the "primitives" which similarly were perceived as signs for the directly expressed- unmediated expression. Of course, I feel that this view of them as pure, unsophisticated and unsocialized is a complete misreading, and is an interpretation filled with racist and imperialist overtones. On one hand I was playing on the privileged and rarified status of the primitive art object in order to pull up the cartoon image from its degraded aesthetic locale, and on the other hand I was playing on the mundane and economic locale of the card to affect one's reading of the primitive that would acknowledge its prior meaningful existence within the social order from which it was extracted.

RN: *And what's your aim in orchestrating the collision of these two images?*

JW: Our culture produces a constant flow of images as they were meant to co-exist. I put images together that want to break apart from each other. On one level it is simply my will, my claim that they co-exist by calling it a painting that forces one to look at these images as a unity. It is a unity that has no organic basis, no claim to normality. But it is a unity held in place by the institutional claim of painting.

RN: *But with paintings used as a kind of "controlled substance," what happens when one begins to make connections between the two opposing images in this situation?*

JW: It's not only my claim to power- my enforcing of this heterogeneous material. It is also that despite the apparent irrationality in the juxtapositions, relationships begin to appear which challenge that claim. The images start to work by signalling their common marginality. The greeting cards in their depictions of rejects and failures, and the primitives in the implicit representation of the Third World.

RN: *And what about a sense of the ironic? Irony is something found in superabundance- you take one step out of your house and suddenly you're falling all over it- but it's not easily synthesized. There's something in your work that suggests what I've called "synthetic irony."*

JW: My work can be seen in these terms, but fabricated in such a way as a double negative. In other words, through the cancelling out of ironies one moves to a new position that is not at all ironic. For me redundancy is interesting in that it employs the logic of repetition and equivalence while negating it at the same time. It thus recovers the image in terms of its ambivalence. But for me irony is really no more than an empty vehicle. I don't feel my position is at all cynical. I'm trying to deal with the possibilities and impossibilities of expression within a cultural context that to a frightening degree produces synthetic expression. Witness the recent phenomena of events such as Live Aid, Hands Across America, and Liverty Weekend, all of which were artificially creating a mood in which to feel good, to feel proud, to feel benevolent.

RN: *So what place does the viewer have in relation to your work?*

JW: I don't know if that's for me to say. But for me in the ambivalent position of being caught within a structure of excess and deprivation, the painting becomes a site for anxiety.

RN: *The painting as an anxious object?*

JW: The painting as symptom.



JULIE WACHTEL, UNTITLED, 1985.
OIL ON CANVAS, 60" x 45".
COURTESY BROOKLYN MUSEUM.



JULIE WACHTEL, HALF OF IT, 1985.
OIL ON CANVAS, 2 PANELS 35" x 54" EACH.
COURTESY NATURE MORTE AND DIANE BROWN GALLERY.

