

Carol Benisatto: Ladies of the Night and Day

Prostitutes have long been a favorite subject of male artists with a strong graphic bent, perhaps most notably Picasso, Toulouse-Lautrec, and Jules Pascin. But that far fewer women than men have been attracted to this subject is hardly the most significant aspect of Carol Benisatto's new exhibition of drawings "Harlots and Hometown Girls," at Viridian Artists, 530 West 25th Street, from May 18 through June 5. (Reception: Saturday, May 22, from 4 to 7 P.M.)

Granted, it is refreshing to see such women treated from a perspective other than that of what art historians refer to as *The Male Gaze*, with its built-in lasciviousness and moral prejudices, which are barely avoidable and are formed early in the libidos and minds of men regarding women who sell their bodies. But what makes the drawings in this show especially engaging above and beyond such considerations is that Benisatto happens to be an artist possessed not only of surpassing draftspersonly powers but also of an empathy for humanity that is implicit in every line that she draws. A true portraitist in the classical sense, she does not regard delineating the human face and body as an occasion for flattery. Rather, she obviously sees capturing a likeness as an opportunity to make human physiognomy and anatomy reflect the inner person in much the same manner that the Old Masters did. In this sense, like Alice Neel or Don Bachardy, Benisatto is something of a throwback — a word used here in the best possible sense of the term.

Working on a generous scale in charcoal with touches of pastel, Benisatto makes drawing a complete medium for finished statements, rather than merely a vehicle for studies or sketches. That she situates her single, seated figures against the white of the paper, usually with no indication of furniture or background, makes them float monolithically in space, lending her compositions a strong abstract quality akin to Vincent Longo's symbolic drawings of brawling office workers in the corporate wars.

This device is especially effective in "Karla," where the voluptuous hooker commands space imperiously, her eyes closed, her head turned in haughty profile, as if to make clear that it is the viewer gawking at her, rather than herself, who is to be scorned. Wearing only a short zebra-patterned jacket with a turned-up

collar and high black spike-heeled fetish boots, her bulging belly and black pubic patch clearly visible between her hands, which clutch the invisible edge of her chair between her spread legs, "Karla" seems to regard our voyeurism with the contempt that she usually reserves for her "johns."

No artist since Toulouse-Lautrec — the



"Coco," 24" x 36" Mixed media

dwarf who, for all his sophistication, was obliged to gaze up at the woman in the brothels of Paris from the perspective of a small boy — has captured such haughtier as well as Benisatto has done here. But unlike her diminutive predecessor, who was patronized and probably patted on the head like a pet by the workers in the bordellos, Benisatto suggests the defensiveness behind the haughty airs with insightful sympathy.

Another of her subjects, "Coco," appears considerably older and more vulnerable than Karla, as she perches in midair with one leg-raised, wearing flimsy lingerie, ludicrous pink elbow gloves, and black high-heeled knee-boots of some soft fabric with folds that appear unflatteringly matched to the contours of her flaccid flesh. Unlike Karla, Coco does not make a show of disdain; rather she confronts the viewer with a haunted gaze that seems to

tell us that innocence is never lost, only misplaced. Obviously, it has been almost a lifetime since she could muster a maidenly blush; so she has to go heavy on the rouge. Yet, from within her painted mask, Coco still stares out us with the eyes of a wounded young girl.

And then there is "Avril" (her name a play on one of Toulouse-Lautrec's most famous subjects, the Moulin Rouge entertainer Jane Avril), who drowns in the heft of her opulent flesh, head lowered onto the two little pillows of her double-chin, eyes closed, a weary working girl in repose. She too wears black elbow gloves, and a fluffy red feather boa is wrapped around her rotund form. But the piece de resistance in this exquisite drawing is the masterfully foreshortened red pump on the foot of the formidable raised leg, over which one of Avril's black-gloved hands is draped, its broad stub of a sole and long slender heel exquisitely extended.

Benisatto's hometown girls are no less poignantly depicted than her harlots. "Arle," your quintessential aging wallflower, wears a spray of tiny flowers in her upswept hairdo, as she gazes off wistfully (perhaps daydreaming of being a Prom Queen), her ample shoulders bare, clutching two white roses in the lap of her long pink gown.

Despite her flowery headband of a type worn by ancient Greek goddesses, "Alexandria" appears hardly more socially secure than Arle, as she draws back into her gossamer wrap, her eyebrows raised as she manages as a tight smile. Only "Theodora" seems self-contained, wearing a corsage, her slightly tousled head resting on one hand, her elbow resting on just the slightest suggestion of an ornately filigreed bench, her legs comfortably crossed, one sandaled foot thrust forward, revealing the artist's ability to make any part of the female anatomy almost as expressive as a face.

Indeed, Carol Benisatto appears to have taken a giant step since her exhibition in the same venue four years ago. Then her figures were drawn in a manner that might accurately be termed Linear Expressionism. While skirting caricature to capture a real sense of character, her style was nowhere near as exacting as it is now that she has focused in more precisely on the particulars of her subjects, thereby capturing greater subtleties of expression that imbue her drawings with far greater psychological resonance.

— Ed McCormack