

In Review

The Many Meanings of Skank

by Suzanne Wise

S Skank is the debut show of the brand new gallery Plus Ultra (235 South First St., 718-387-3844; www.plusultragallery.com). According to Plus Ultra, "Skank" refers to an aesthetic of sexy, rebellious sleaze that lives in defiance of a repressed and oppressive official culture.

At first glance, the show appears to be putting a frame around a pretty conventional (one might say guy-oriented) version of what's supposedly dirtily sexy or transgressive: strippers, sluts, cock suckers, cock fondlers. However, on closer examination, most works in the show grapple in a complicated, conflicted way with voyeurism, sexual commerce, objectification and sexuality at large. This is true both of Skanky works that describe a shame and fear-accented lust that is patriarchy's specialty (what I think of as Classic Skanky), and works that operate against traditional icons or translations of sexuality. (PostSkanky?). All of which is to say that I have come to appreciate Skank as a large territory with diverse terrain.

The Classic Skanky Award could easily go to James Esber's gouache portrait of a mutating 1940ish glam girl. Stained in lurid shades of orange and purple, she stares out at the viewer from the pedestal of one small cushion. She is the ultimate slut in that she is Excessive Sexuality incarnate--a hydra that sprouts an extra fetishized high heel on the end of her arm, a torso morphing into thigh. She is so excessive in her parts that she can only be parts: she is impossible to be perceived as an integrated comprehensible whole. She is a pile of signifiers of female sex object: all leg and high heel and breasts with drooping down brazier. The image haunts because it is too familiar: She's the pinup bolted into the collective unconscious. However, a sketchy, scribbling style (mark making is foregrounded so that we don't forget she is artifice created by an aggressive hand) makes her seem like a newspaper cartoon or bathroom-wall graffiti; she's cheap and could be tossed out or sponged off at any time.

Secret Skanky is Classic Skanky sublimated. (Secret Skanky could be the Skanky of the New Millennium, an era in which pornography is a Secret multi-billion-dollar industry that mainstream corporations profit from.) Secret Skanky can be found in Christopher Johnson's painterly depiction of an anonymous roadside pit stop--a dark and somber scene with towering pines, a dark low building and trucks in a parking lot. The title of Johnson's work is the little black light that illuminates the hidden: sexual commerce by the name of "Playtime Boutique." The thick gray tracks in the seemingly snowy driveway are evidence of sloppy heavy traffic. Heather Halliday's gloomy black-and-white photographs are haunted by Secret Skanky as well. Dead leaves and urban debris take up much of the picture frames while referents to secret sex--a Lifestyle condom package, words that appear to be "Sex Hall" painted on a wall--are tiny or shuttled to the background. Sexual expression is the What's Missing From This Picture. What's overbearingly present are the looming structures (and absences) that house desire.

Harold Nolan's "Fever" painting is Classic Skanky broken apart. We get lodged so deep within the Inner Skanky that the human is no longer recognizable as entirely human.

This and more online at www.wburg.com.

Nolan's landscape is aswarm with the results of a diversity of illusion-making strategies: flat patterned cloud and sunburst shapes; a big bug with armored skeleton body sprawling across the foreground; a tiny hot-pink nude lady in silhouette; a tiny sketch of a man with nude buttocks and penis in view but missing arms and legs, monster heads or masks; a scary beast with eyes on long shafts, and a red gaping mouth; tentacles that have been stuffed into free-floating pockets; a tinker-toy ladder structure that climbs upward and disappears.

Here eroticism is private, fantastical, mutant and a bit out of control. In process and/or damaged. Here there is no separation between Skanky and nonskanky. Bits of sexual referents drift in the same realm as roaring insects and beasts and pink stars: human acts appear tiny, disconnected and masturbatory. And at the same time, vibrant, alive, a fury of the creative.

Works by Joan Linder and Stacy Greene upend the classic Skanky voyeur/object scenario (PostSkanky!). Stacy Greene's video could, in fact, be the poster-child for Most Liberated Skanky; Skanky without the loathing. Her addictive video features a buoyant dance soundtrack and stripteasers in silhouette. The mostly female cast enthusiastically removes layers in a bright squishy lava lamplike flat background. The dancers are all young-bodied, have a good sense of performance and rhythm and remove icons of a traditional stripper act--long gloves, lacy bra, etc--and thus ring true to our expectations of the Classic Skanky's version of The Stripper.

And yet, because we only see the silhouette, when a female figure removes her bra or her gloves, she still looks the same. We didn't even know she was wearing gloves until she removed them (oh, there look, that flappy shape of the material peeling off... gloves!) And as we become entranced by the body as flat black shape in a throbbing color field, the body become elusive. It moves toward us as a crisply outlined, gravity-bound human; it moves away and becomes a raggedly-cut paper doll. Greene has also split the screen so that each dancer becomes two; a duo that sometimes collides and swallows parts of the other (a head decapitates and returns; a neck turns to a pin).

The title of Greene's piece--"Rorschach Striptease"--is a good one: The body undressing is a Rorschach: we assert our fantasies all over it. In Greene's work, bodies are never naked enough; or rather at their most naked, they are lost to us, in darkness. (The strippers are actually dancing behind some kind of a curtain, and thus they don't see us, and we don't really get to see them. We see outline, contour, the hole in the air a body leaves behind.) The body in silhouette, the shadow of the body without the body, seems in celebration: it is freer of associations, it dances with a mirror image of itself; it defends itself against our desire to rip the top layer off everything we see and get inside.

Joan Linder's "Man About Town," a photographic documentation of an on-the-street art happening highjacks the oggling male gaze and aims it back at the oppressor. Or at least at the kind of Skanky guy who likes to masturbate in public. Linder made drawings of a pudgy middle-aged white guy that she perched in different locals around the city; she then documented the set-ups with snapshots. The guy shows up--either holding his dick or reclining and smiling like a classic female nude-- in transit and in places of commerce: at Kinkos, Home Depot, the subway and in front of a Hot Pretzel stand.

Not only does Linder provide a sendup of the stylized omnipresent female nude in art but she also deflates the power of the male exhibitionist (and the accompany phallic) to intimidate. Even when the guy's dick is in the foreground, it is not a monument to power. The penis appears as a prop or an accessory—akin to a little purse that the doughy man has to drag around with him wherever he goes. It's also fun to think about the event behind the snapshot: Grrrl artist carrying her male nude model around town and making him pose in public where ever she demands.

Despite Linder and Greene's subversive works, female desire (as anything divergent from the master narratives of Classic Skanky) is curiously nearly absent from the show. It does gets a muted, cropped nod in photographed film strips from John Waters and a murky painting by Marc Hulson; both works feature close-ups of female faces that writhe with sexual ecstasy ... or anguish/agony/pain. A collage by Esther Planas includes ball-point pen and magic marker drawings (including a unicorn) and writing (big fat letters), and stickers. Referencing junior high school girl modes of art making, the collage also includes scraps from what appears to be a men's hetero porn mag (nude pretty lady performing fellatio). Jose L. Cortes's gorgeous enigmatic depiction of a gilded male torso painted on found newspaper [it's entitled "Fumanchu II (Frankie)," for the Fumanchu II tattoo that appears on the subject's arm] gets closest to an alternate version of sexual beauty.

OK, now for UnSkanky Skanky. Which is to say, if I hadn't seen Robert Melee's painting/sculpture "Second Chance Substitution" in this show, Skanky would be the last word I would use to describe his piece . . . except maybe for the fact that it's made out of beer bottle caps, which might be Skanky if you think cheap, low-class Bud beer. "Second Chance" looks giddily elegant though, like a minimalist painting in an eruptive pop mood. Its plaster toffee-brown surface is embedded with bottle caps that are highlighted in candy colors. It is pretty and invites touch with its finger-friendly surface and scalloped edges (maybe this is Skanky after all!). "Second Chance" is definitely a turn-on for the kid in us who likes mud and sweets. Regardless, my interpretation of Melee's art is proof of "Skank"'s powers of seduction: after seeing the show a few times, everything started to look Skanky.

Suzanne Wise is the author of The Kingdom of the Subjunctive (Alice James Books, 2000), a collection of poetry. Her poems have also been published in the anthology American Poetry: the Next Generation (Carnegie Mellon Press, 2000).