

ART PAPERS

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SAINT LOUIS, MISSOURI

By Jeffrey Hughes

Brooklyn-based artist **HEATHER BENNETT** (*William Shearburn Gallery, July 11—August 16, 2003*) uses the imagery of high fashion advertising as an allegorical perspective on class assumptions, self-portraiture and the myths of gendered neutrality. Although clearly thinking of Cindy Sherman's early work, Bennett develops a contrasting creative strategy. The viewer is never removed from the identity of the artist, who has taken on a new persona not as a stand-in for a Calvin Klein model, but as the model herself.

Following Walter Benjamin's reading of the nineteenth-century image of the prostitute as she who shows the falsity of capitalism as pure façade, pure commodity, the fashion model functions as both a physical and economic seductress. The advertisement's concern is less attire

than it is the creation of a certain visual attitude, a controlled response for those who use the presumptive status-providing accoutrements of designer clothing and cosmetics, as well as for those who find the image an erotic outlet. Bennett reveals the nature of this dual construct by subverting both the costume object and the willful objectification of the subject.

Like the advertisements from which they stem, these works are less truthful than they seem. Bennett acquires costumes and accessories from thrift stores and yet they match the fashion industry's products precisely. Similarly, these works consider not only identity, but also the structure of the fashion shoot, a performance requiring make-up artists, draping and theatrical lighting. The images suggest a direct appropriation of high fashion advertisements, but the resultant verisimilitude strengthens our understanding of the relationship of image to allegory.

This exhibition comprises six large digital photographs mounted on wood panels and painstakingly covered with polymer resin to replicate massive glossy photographs, and one artist's book documenting a 2003 performance. In *Untitled (Dolce & Gabbana)* (2002), the artist poses with a male model/collaborator in a provocative moment as she is embraced from behind and her right hand suggestively slides down into her panties. All of this is restaged in the exact pose, lighting and attire of the published advertisement, which was for perfume. The original attests to the sophisticated power of linking alluring imagery to commodity and the blatant commodification of female forms for that purpose. The diptych *Untitled (Calvin Klein)* (2002) demonstrates the intensity of that linkage by an increase of scale and greater ambiguity of possible narrative. However, these are self-portraits, a recontextualization that decries an attention to the artist assuming the role of potentially alienating subject matter.

We never believed that high fashion advertisement was anything other than a vehicle to sell commodities, but this work has one absolutely unexpected result. Through Bennett's work we can see both the political critique of fashion photography and the



Heather Bennett, *Untitled (Dolce and Gabbana)*, 2002, photograph mounted on wood, resin, 60 by 48 inches (courtesy the artist).

inherent beauty of this most product-laden genre. Gucci and Prada "portraits" are beautiful, and are often formally stunning and compositionally complex. The ability to accept representations of female beauty as aesthetic experiences has been virtually removed from critical dialogue. In accord with Amelia Jones's notion of radical narcissism, Bennett has revealed herself to a point beyond the possibility of disinterest. Bennett simultaneously displays herself as model, parody and critique. The viewer/interpreter must confront the image of the artist as both a particularized body and a self engaged in social unveiling. The dialogue here is not merely dialectical, but has multiple and fractured possibilities. Heather Bennett's simulated advertisements have proposed that all of those surface realities have meaning.