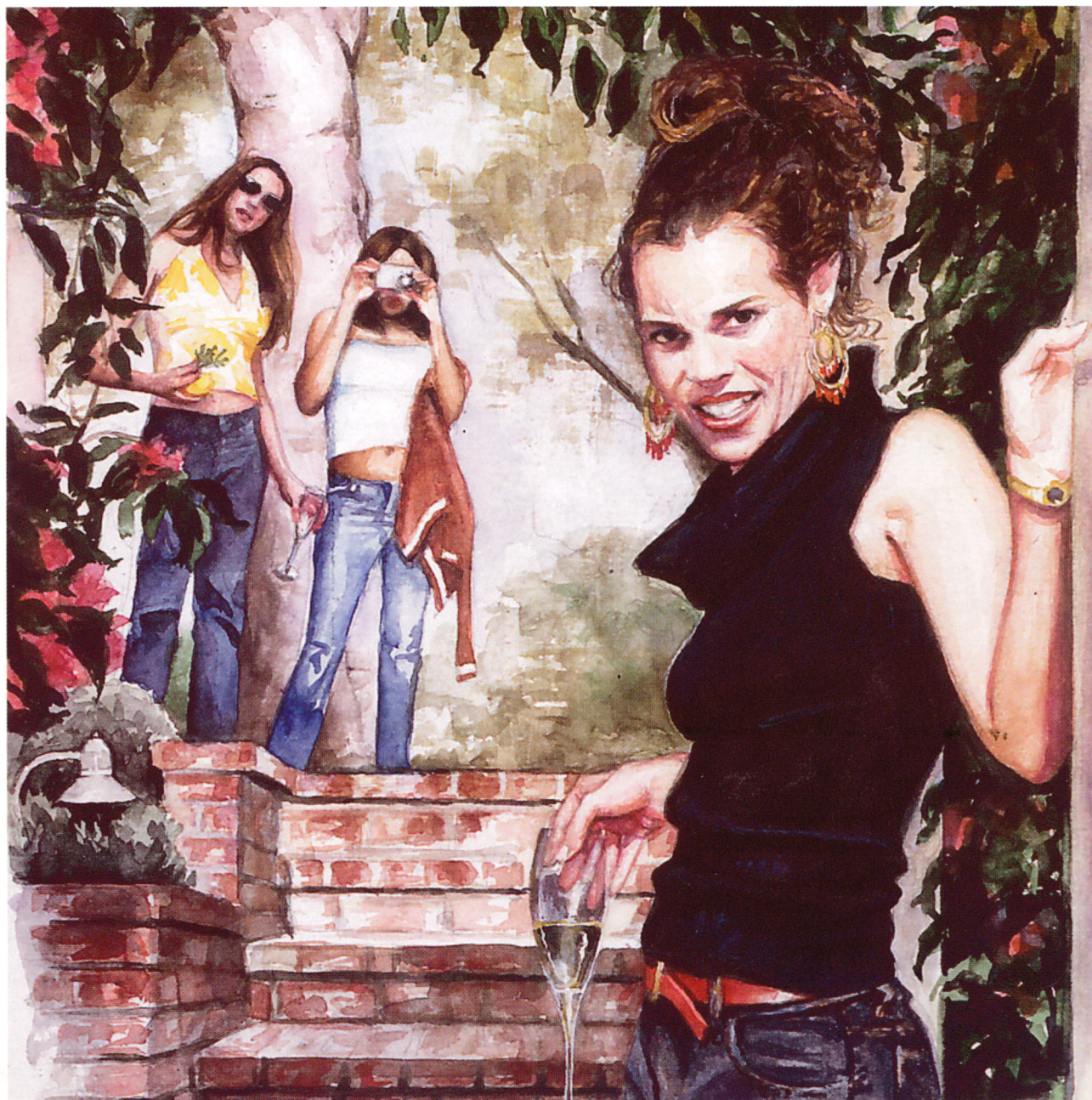


Flash Art



Delia Brown
"ITHB: Guerilla Lounging No. 21"
Watercolor on paper





DELIA BROWN

ARTIFICIAL LIFE

Michael Cohen

DELIA BROWN'S PAINTINGS and videos depict sexy Los Angeles hipsters languidly inhabiting clubs, pools, bungalows, and spaces of clichéd L.A. fabulousness as imagined in the artist's mind. Brown's paintings have generated an intense amount of interest and controversy in New York. Perhaps that is because her work pushes the art world's current vogue for vacuous celebrity, adolescent worship, and base materialism into the spotlight in a manner closer to the excesses of rappers like Foxy Brown than to the art community's refined milieu. *Flash Art* caught up with Delia Brown in the Lower East Side and found an intriguing set of theoretical and art historical concerns lying beneath her work's designer label surface.

Michael Cohen: *In a recent review, The New York Times described your main themes as "vanity, decadence, and the cult of youth." How accurate does that sound to you?*

Delia Brown: Those aren't my central concerns, but I can see why those terms were used. I think they're easy ways of talking about my representations, but I don't believe the meaning of the paintings rests solely in their visual forms. I see my works' content as a convergence of the images with the processes behind creating them: which is about fictional constructs, the uncomfortable space between values and desires, the annihilating aspect of indulgence (the anxiety that comes with playing out the fantasy), and the fun/pleasure/satisfaction that happens between the people in-

involved in living out the roles. I think vanity is an aspect of my work, just as it's an aspect of most of the popular media that I draw upon for inspiration, and as it always played a role in bourgeois traditions of easel painting. Decadence also fascinates me; the "cult of youth" not so much. For instance, in my project with Margo Leavin (*No Place Like Home*), I was acting out a fantasy based on my intrigue with her — she was the object of desire for me. I was interested in a particular relationship with an older woman. I think there's a strong

Top: *Pastorale, 2002. Video still. Courtesy D'Amelio Terras, New York. Opposite, bottom:* *Reading in the Red Room, 2002. Acrylic and oil on board, 20 x 30 cm. Courtesy Il Capricorno, Venice.*



glamour quotient in that, but it doesn't have to do with youth — it has more to do with sophistication, independence, and social status. The thing about playing out a fantasy, and having pictures that “prove” one was there, is that it nullifies the desire to a certain extent. I'm not going to make the same work twice because why would I want what I've already wanted once I've obtained it? That's why the themes you referred to are going to become useless ways of describing the work: my themes will always move away from whatever they have already been.

MC: *I think the role-playing that grounds your painting series is an interesting and less well-known aspect of your work. Do you feel any connection with role-playing photographers such as Cindy Sherman or Nikki S. Lee?*

DB: I don't remember for sure, but I think I first saw Cindy Sherman's work when I was in high school. Her early work is important to me because it was happening at a time when ways of defining “woman” were in flux. This feeling of occupying multiple spaces/personae — and the impossibility of picturing one's identity as a fixed and knowable thing — it had an enormous impact on the formation of the ‘self’ for my generation. But I think that the more popular manifestations of it (e.g. Madonna) had more of an influence than any high cultural practices, especially when all one did when one got home from school was turn on MTV. I think what Nikki S. Lee does is brave and difficult, but I don't do such sustained “performing” in my own work. Mine is more like a momentary charade, documented with fancy little objects. When I

construct a situation, I go for it (sometimes making myself nauseated from the saturation of so much artifice), and I get it out of my system right then. The rest of the time it's just about an introverted studio practice.

MC: *So give me an example of the actual process behind playing a role and making your paintings.*

DB: For instance, in *Forsaken Lover* I wanted to make a project about an idealized but troubled love affair between me and a well-known actor. I tried to get Benicio Del Toro but instead I got rejection letters from his publicity people. When they didn't go for it, I fell back on picturing a lonely, romantic, Ophelia-type character. I had my friend, the photographer Ramona Trent, document me in various situations, looking wistful and forlorn, and then I painted from the photos. I diverged from that method for my last series, “Between Hameau and Walden,” and let the “enactment” happen on the canvas, instead of in front of the camera. Painting without an object made me feel like a hack — like Marie Antoinette dressing up as a milkmaid to play peasant, copping a pretend innocence. Later I lost that cynicism and felt like I was just struggling toward some kind of truth in the process — that's where the Walden part emerged. I hadn't planned on them being landscapes; they just ended up there.

MC: *Does living in L.A. affect your use of fantasy?*

DB: My family moved to L.A. from Berkeley when I was nine. We went from an ethnically mixed hippie neighborhood into a heavily Christian one with manicured



Top: *Suite Life*, 2000. Performance at the UCLA New Wight Gallery, Los Angeles.

Bottom: *Bedroom*, 2001. Acrylic on board, 22 x 28 cm. Courtesy D'Amelio Terras, New York.
Opposite: *The Good Mother from There's No Place Like Home*, 2001. Oil on canvas, 60 x 160 cm. Courtesy Margo Leavin, Los Angeles.



lawns in West L.A. It was very conservative, and while trying to negotiate all this new emphasis on doing things the cookie-cutter way, I started fantasizing about fitting in, and wanted to diminish what made me feel alien or individual. After I was expelled and then got an “opportunity transfer” to go to a school in a more upper-class neighborhood, I took the opportunity to take on the early '80s thrift-store club-kid style and hang out with a crowd of kids who had more fun. I guess that's when I started to become aware of class and how those distinctions take on style and form and begin to constitute a social language.

MC: *Technically and thematically your work reminds me of the packs of young males in Tim Gardner's watercolors....*

DB: Yeah, I connect with Tim Gardner, because he also works from snapshots and the pictures are clearly personal, with ambiguous narratives. The perverse gesture of using a pussy medium like watercolor to illustrate belligerent scenes is also interesting to me (though admittedly it's so pervasive now that it's kind of losing its perversity).