

Mattress factory's 'LIKENESS' reflects on artists' visions of themselves

Preview

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By Mary Thomas, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette



Annie O'Neill

Artist Greer Lankton photographed inside her installation at the Mattress Factory in 1996.

How much do you reveal about yourself to others on a daily basis?

A surprising amount if you're artist Greer Lankton, whose raw, intimate installation at the Mattress Factory reflects her life as a transsexual, an anorexic, an asthmatic and a recovered heroin addict.

"It's all about ME, Not You" is the saucy title of the work, a re-creation of her small Chicago apartment that debuted at the North Side museum in 1996 in a three-artist exhibition.

But that verbal brio was more a cry than an assertion. Lankton died, at 38, a month after the show opened. The installation work, her largest and last, was recently given by Lankton's family to the museum, where it has been re-installed as a part of the permanent collection.

LIKENESS

- **Where:** Mattress Factory, 500 Sampsonia Way, North Side.
- **When:** Opening reception 7-9 p.m. Friday (\$10, members free). Exhibition continues through March 21.
- **Hours:** 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays, 1-5 p.m. Sundays.
- **Admission:** \$10, seniors \$8, students \$7, under 6 free.

• **Information:** 412-231-3169 or www.mattress.org.

• **Events:** Elaine King will give a curator talk at 7 p.m. Nov. 19, preceded by a 6 p.m. guided exhibition tour (\$10, members free). Jan. 28 Amy Henderson, cultural historian, National Portrait Gallery, Washington, D.C., and Eric Shiner, Milton Fine curator of art, Andy Warhol Museum, will discuss "Media, Celebrity Culture and Warhol."

The autobiographical piece will be unveiled during an opening reception Friday night for the exhibition "LIKENESS," itself an exploration of how artists' depictions of themselves or others have evolved in the 21st century.

"It's all about ME, Not You" is peopled with the gaunt, bruised dolls that made Lankton a cult figure among collectors and earned her invitations to exhibit in 1995 in such prestigious shows as the Venice Biennale and the Biennial Exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York City.

Born in 1958 in Flint, Mich., Greg Robert Lankton was as a child more interested in making dolls and playing dress-up than in stereotypical boy activities. In 1979, Lankton had a sex-change operation and took the name Greer. When in high school, she studied for two years at The School of the Art Institute of Chicago, afterward earning a bachelor's of fine arts with honors from Pratt Institute in Brooklyn.

In the 1980s, she was a star in New York's East Village art world, exhibiting at trendy gallery Civilian Warfare and being photographed by Nan Goldin, documentarian of the abject among others. By the early 1990s, recovering from a failed marriage and drug addiction, she'd returned to Chicago.

At the 1996 Mattress Factory debut, Lankton -- slender and blond, her height extended by four-inch red heels, almost theatrically made up -- appeared frail but also luminous, surrounded by admirers and evidently pleased by the way her installation had turned out.

Besides the dolls, the "apartment" -- imbued simultaneously with innocence and dark sensuality -- holds busts by Lankton, fan memorabilia for the likes of Andy Warhol superstar Candy Darling, religious imagery and macabre truncated fiber torsos that are mementos of friends who died of AIDS.

Most engaging is an ailing, pale figure lying in bed beneath a blanket littered with Lankton's empty prescription bottles.

Almost in counterpoint are a group of sweet-faced Raggedy Ann and Raggedy Andy dolls, gathered by the entry door. But rather than a contradiction, they are a reminder that lives don't neatly fit pre-packaged formats, and that the most growth occurs when established parameters of perception are brought into question.

Updating portraiture

Questioning is the current that sparks "LIKENESS," installations by seven artists guest curated by Elaine King, freelance critic and curator and Carnegie Mellon University professor.

Portraiture has been a part of cultural expression since at least the early Mediterranean civilizations, but certainly its values and forms are radically changed in an age when casual images of people are instantaneously distributed around the globe via cell phones and social networking sites.

The creation of a lasting image for posterity ceased to be an option reserved for the powerful when a bourgeoisie developed with sufficient income to pay an artist or, later, photographer, to produce a portrait.

Similarly, while even realistic representation is always subjective, artists began to question what constituted an image. The introduction of emotional or psychological states compounded the possibilities, introducing expressionistic elements.

Add in new technologies and evolving notions of role and lifestyle, and what construes self-image or portrait is thrown wide open. The artists of "LIKENESS" respond:

As with Jim Campbell's figure abstracted into multiple LED projections. Dependent upon the LED spacing, an image diffuses into shadow or congeals into a lumbering form as the viewer stands within the piece observing. Having earned degrees in electrical engineering and mathematics from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Campbell holds several image processing patents.

Paul DeMarinis, who was one of the first artists to use computers in performance, has designed a piece using a projector and phosphorescent powder that creates the kind of missing child image seen on milk cartons, and then gradually disassembles it.

Jonh Herschend mines his childhood, growing up in an 1880s theme park in the Ozarks, to question how identity is formed, where reality ends and fantasy begins. A video of an illicit affair and a car wreck caused by a drunk driver contrasts with the innocence of childhood recorded on another; identity changes as life rolls on.

Nikki Lee, whose role-playing images from her "Projects" series were exhibited at Carnegie Museum of Art in 2002, exhibits oversized apparent self-portraits that seem to overlay photograph and charcoal drawing. A New York resident since 1993, she is in her native Korea completing a new series.

Carnegie Mellon University School of Art faculty member Joseph Mannino is known for his clay sculpture, but here presents split photographic portraits of people, one half taken at the beginning of interviews he conducted (and will continue to conduct) at the MF and the other taken at the end.

New Yorker Tony Oursler, whose psychobabbling projections provoked smiles from visitors to the 1995 Carnegie International, is populating the MF basement gallery with what King describes as "phantasmagorical characters."

Greta Pratt finds dignity and pathos in individuals who don green Statue of Liberty costumes and stand along roadsides to flag drivers for transient tax preparation offices. The photographer lives in Ringwood, N.J.

Such a range of imagery whets the mental appetite and should stimulate conversation and critique.

A visitor just might walk out with a new self-image.

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