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Women's Fiction

by Jen Schwartz

CHICK LIT: REVISED SUMMER READING AT TRACY WILLIAMS, LTD. | JUNE 27 – AUGUST 9, 2013

Allegory and fiction have been both subject of and impetus for art making for centuries, and countless exhibitions have been organized to demonstrate literature's influence on art. The art/writing relationship has been so extensively tested and surveyed in the contemporary domain that today the premise seems overused, if not exhausted. It would be tempting to dismiss yet another literature-themed exhibition—particularly a gendered show that assembles a group of women artists contending with the novel under a touchy-feely title like Chick Lit: Revised Summer Reading. That title, which elicits a literary genre limited to saccharine storylines and prescribed female roles, hardly indicates the range of serious conceptual and intertextual strategies that many of the contributing artists employ here.

Despite the show's off-putting title and premise, Chick Lit succeeds in bringing together the works of several standout female contemporaries. Many of the artists make a practice of engaging with myths and fictions, narrative, and some of literature's most provocative themes. Others respond to the physical properties of the page, dissecting it through clever and codified means. Some of the most interesting pieces appear to be in dialogue, installed so as to speak directly to each other.

Two works that seem to be explicitly in conversation are Sara Greenberger Rafferty's print "Orlando" (2011), a portrait of Virginia Woolf's gender-bending hero, hung straight across from Liz Markus's "George Plimpton" (2013), a five-foot-tall painting of the famed editor of *The Paris Review*. Depicting two of the twentieth century's great literary characters/contributors, the works together provide an irreverent take on sex and influence as they smear and blur in treatment. Markus paints with acrylic on raw canvas, and her Plimpton's aged-male flesh, in fuzzy peach washes, looks markedly plump and feminine bleeding into the unprimed surface. Rafferty's process of water-staining computer inkjet prints takes her image a step further, dissolving Orlando's male-to-female portrait into a future state, past recognition—transforming the artist's subject from a figure to an eerie apparition.

In another pairing, artists use textiles to translate great stories of frenzied desire, emotional risk, and punishment. Elaine Reichek's wall piece, "There Was a Lovely Thing" (2010), translates the ancient Greek myth of Ariadne's thread onto a stretch of beautifully embroidered linen. Here, Reichek renders a lyrical passage in hand-stitched text, telling a tale of passion and retrospection. Barbara Bloom's "Lolita" (1998) carpet is equally seductive, though much more peculiar. Displayed on the floor, the piece is a six-foot-long wool version of Bloom's green first-edition paperback copy of the novel, with her own hand-written notes knit into the rug in purple. Bloom is purportedly a fanatical Nabokov reader, and the meta-work exemplifies an obsession with an obsession, echoing the book's theme of twisted infatuation. Furthermore, in a possible nod to the novel's ultimate tragedies, the thick, moss-colored carpet is conspicuously scaled to grave-plot dimensions.

Taking a more restrained approach to the page, several artists in Chick Lit draw upon the book's material structure. Erica Baum's four framed wall pieces renew a classic text-based practice. Assembling an archive of old paperback novels, her framed Dog Ear prints are

made by juxtaposing two yellowing book pages, one folded in front of the other in a triangular, place keeping dog-ear. The resulting photographs show texts meeting along a diagonal centerline and moving in two directions, horizontal and vertical, forming a kind of exquisite corpse in which meaning is created at the seam. Denise Kupferschmidt also uses found books, alongside a pared-down visual language of symbols. Her “Motifs (Two Suns)” (2012) presents a stark narrative in brushed black ink on five torn-out book pages, demonstrating the slow, strange passage of time as two suns rise and set over the ocean repeatedly.

Three small photographs by Sara VanDerBeek, hung throughout the exhibition, tie together several of the show’s thematic conceits. In gorgeous blue and violet hues, the pictures capture in acute close-up a series of scarred and crumbling city streets. Transformation, decay, death, and time all resurface in the photographs, though in such abstraction the significance of these concepts relies on written referents. The works were first shown in VanDerBeek’s 2010 Whitney exhibition, *To Think of Time*—the title taken from the eponymous nineteenth-century poem by Walt Whitman. “Not a day passes—not a minute or second, without a corpse!” is how *To Think of Time* muses, exuberantly, on life’s passage. Whitman’s perspicacity and spirit have continually influenced artists and cultural practitioners for over a century. Here, his verse in its consummate depth of feeling helps to add meaning to VanDerBeek’s work and to offset her coolness.