

“Femininity and Animality: Portraits of a Lady Exposed”

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Philosophers use animals as foils to define what it is to be human. Human reason and sophistication are conceived in contrast to the brute simplicity of animal instincts; the so-called “humanity” of humans depends on the comparison. In Andrea Hornick’s work, animals expose the humanity and *inhumanity* of the people portrayed: women posing for portraits by great artists of the past. Exceptionally witty, irreverent and playful, Hornick’s paintings constitute a feminist intervention into the history of portraiture, interrogating conventions of titling, pose, gesture and gaze. At the same time, they expose the fault lines in women’s highly choreographed self-presentation. A suppressed smile, a hint of impatience in the jaw, a melancholy turn of the mouth or a self-possessive gesture of the hand suggest hidden layers of desire and emotion behind the pictorial façade of femininity.

Hornick’s project is to reconceive Old Master portraits of women made and commissioned by men. Her strategy is a kind of inverse appropriation, inserting contemporary ideas and images into the art of the past rather than the other way around, and thereby interrupting rather than uprooting the aura of the museum object. To do this, she approaches her sources both critically and creatively, with a biting sense of humor that turns notions of “femininity” and “animality” on their heads. Yet she remains respectful of the artists and subjects she critiques; her painstaking re-creations do them honor, even as she subverts them with additions and alterations. By reducing works by artists like Raphael, Rubens, Titian and Ingres to diminutive scale and disrupting them with images of animals, Hornick manipulates the Western canon of portraiture and its homogenizing ideals of female representation. The demure three-quarter pose, the bland expression with soft eyes, the body constrained and commodified by fashion, these stock elements are either overpowered or made ridiculous by creature companions impervious to notions of propriety and other human social codes. In this sense, Hornick’s animals are a source

of vicarious liberation for the women they escort, while also exposing the cruelty and absurdity of their bounded lives.

In *Woman Who Wears the Face of Her Clothes' Worst Enemy and Whose Reflection Betrays Her Beauty Ideal*, Hornick masks Ingres's portrait of *Madame Moitessier* (1856) with a monstrously large moth, the ravenous foe of her fine clothes and of her idealized facial features as well. The moth's placement suggests an elaborate costume for a masquerade – a popular event in Moitessier's high-society milieu – and encapsulates the dilemma of fashion as a feminine tool: fashion hides as much as it reveals; it is a form of oppression as much as self-expression. In Ingres's painting, fashion rules over Madame Moitessier's life (in the course of sitting for the portrait she changed her dress choice more than once); but as Hornick's moth symbolically suggests, fashion is also what nineteenth-century poet Giacomo Leopardi called “Madame Death.” By adding this morbid, deforming prosthesis to Moitessier's seductive figure, Hornick lampoons Ingres's distortions of female anatomy. The languorous hand that Théophile Gautier referred to as a “hand of superhuman beauty” now uses its “violently disjointed finger” to caress the furry interior of a moth's wing.

The apparent obliviousness of Hornick's women to their animal alter egos is striking. They seem unable to emote, and the introduction of the absurd only heightens their reserve. We expect them to react to their beastly attendants, yet they maintain serene control, and herein lies much of the works' humor. In *Stroll in Garden with Small Dog and Large Ear Muffs that Double as an Estate Melodizer*, an enormous lobster head engulfs the placid sweetness of the noblewoman's face, serving her as a pair of alien headphones. Like a massive growth of gray brain matter framing and expanding from her tiny skull, the lobster ironizes her vapid and dainty appearance. (Her huge prosthetic brain is that of a shellfish, not exactly known for its intelligence, and her eyeball “ear muffs” are too grotesque to be a fashionable accessory.) At the same time, its crustaceous antennae direct attention to the v-shape of her bodice, both constraining her torso and marking her sex. The layering of an eighteenth-century portrait by Goya (*The Marquesa de*

Pontejos, c. 1786), a twentieth-century black-and-white photograph from National Geographic, and Hornick's twenty-first-century painterly merger of both, collages time and shifts in artistic technique. In fact, the works began as collages combining fine art reproductions from books and photographs from old magazines. Hornick then meticulously painted from the collages as well as from the original source paintings, maintaining a hand-held scale and collage-like effect. The stylistic mismatch is important: the animals often seem to occupy a different spatial plane closer to the viewer, and as such they serve as a link between the distant historical space-time of Hornick's source and the present of her act of remaking (and ours of viewing as well). The visual disjunction jars the viewer out of a passive, uncritical mode of looking, forcing us to look again at canonical art in a contemporary frame.

In *Grasshopper and Woman Caught in the Act of Sewing a Bonnet to Hide His Antennae*, sexual innuendo and human-insect resemblance display the satirical humor of Hornick's feminist critique. The work is a radical re-make of a well-known painting by Gilbert Stuart (*Mrs. Richard Yates*, 1793/94), rhyming woman and grasshopper in a wryly suggestive double portrait. Comparing the woman's bony face and sheathed hairstyle to the grasshopper's phallic head, Hornick injects sexuality and humor into an image of puritanical and industrious American womanhood. The grasshopper seems to straddle the space of the portrait and that of the viewer, as if a metamorphosis by molting could release the sitter from her silken cage. But as in several of Hornick's re-imagined portraits, the insect is the woman's predator as well as her liberator and protector. Its exaggerated size and probing appendages suggest a sexual menace.

The threat of sexual aggression and penetration is even more present in Hornick's revision of Raphael's *Donna Velata* (c. 1513), re-titled to expose the veiled woman's psychological state: *Woman Resigned to Keeping the Company of Only Her Internal Buzzing and Stealthy Though Somewhat Nectarious Bodyguard*. Hornick's lengthy description of the picture seems to parody the bombastic titles of Neoclassical history painting, here applied to a portrait whose laconic title gives the woman no identity at all. Hovering near her face and positioned as if

pulling back her veil, the outsize bee is a metaphor for the docile woman's inner thoughts while also posing as her personal guard. But as in *Grasshopper and Woman*, the bee is an oppressive protector, pointing a spear-like blade of grass at her breast. The sensual gesture of the woman's hand appears newly self-protective as a result, perhaps a gesture of defense against the artist and the viewer beyond the frame.

Hornick's most personal painting of the series, *Self-Portrait as Illuminated Woman with Pacing Donkeys: Allegory for Cycles of Life and Death*, makes her project explicit: the enlightenment of women and the history of art through retrospective intervention. In this work Hornick herself subsumes the role of Georges de la Tour's *Penitent Magdalene* (c. 1640-45), reinventing a figure of sexual shame as an "illuminated" intellectual woman. A pair of "pacing" donkeys keeps her company as she thinks, their simple profiles made comically intelligent by the philosophical weight of their new surroundings.

Human-animal relationships are typically represented either in terms of hierarchy and difference or similarity and solidarity. Hornick plays with both possibilities, often in a single work. On the one hand, her alignment of women and animals suggests their common mistreatment by people in power. (Many of Hornick's animals are either the source of delicacies for the rich or exploited by them for labor.) On the other hand, her animals expose the artificiality of human standards of femininity, and paradoxically so given their unnatural appearance in terms of space and scale. A moth, a lobster, a grasshopper, a pair of donkeys— none of these creatures are considered conventionally beautiful or charming by humans. Their unattractiveness seems intentional, an embodiment of Kafka-esque fantasies of relief from stifling standards of beauty.

Playing with anthropomorphic animals and zoomorphic women, Hornick exposes the absurdity of portrait conventions along with the animalistic underside to femininity. No less significantly, she reinvents – and makes conceptual – the Old Master copy as an outmoded rite of passage for emerging artists today.