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By John Washington

Ron Shigeta: We All Need Biotechnology
By Meara Sharma

Of Monsters & Women
By Nimmi Gowrinathan

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Drawing on History

This month in Berlin, June Glasson exhibits her series The Foulest of Shapes, ink-and-wash drawings of women engaged in violence and revelry that pose complex questions about what it means to be a feminist artist today.

By Rachel Somerstein

Once you have subtracted the influence of other artists, what remains of an emerging artist's

work? Figuring that out is how Roberta Smith defined her job as a critic in a recent *New York Times* interview.

Nowhere is that process more delicate, or more challenging, than when critiquing an artist who has not shown much work publicly and about whom little has been written. Such is the case with June Glasson, a thirty-year-old painter from Oyster Bay, Long Island, who spent the better part of the past year in Berlin creating a series of ink-and-wash drawings called *The Foulest of Shapes*. The small-scale, intimate works, which feature nineteenth-century scenes of raucous dancing and drunken revelry alongside drawings of contemporary women engaged in mock violence, are on view at Berlin Nature Morte through October 31, 2009.

Beauty and Chivalry Join in the Worship of Terpischore and Bacchus, 2009, Ink on Paper.

The series was inspired by *Sins of New York*, a compendium of stories and illustrations culled from the long-defunct nineteenth-century tabloid *National Police Gazette*, a New York-based paper that featured profiles and illustrations of criminals and the life of vice. Glasson, who earned a B.A./B.F.A. in 2002 from Cornell University, was particularly taken with the many portraits of women who, in comic-strip fashion, descend from nice, rural girls to corrupt urbanites. In one memorable panel, a demure and feminine woman, hair neatly arranged, becomes corrupted by factory work and men. In the final frame, her hair is prettily unkempt; she smiles, cigarette and wine in hand, now a grande dame of sorts. Her smug expression

suggests that, Christian Women's Temperance Movement notwithstanding, she does not find

her transformation quite so troubling.

As a series, the historically oriented and contemporary scenes in *Foulest of Shapes* don't quite go together. Each seems abbreviated, particularly the latter, suggesting that Glasson should have chosen one and stuck to it. But they are unified by Glasson's academic style, which suggests influences from both illustrative and decorative art. Thematically, too, each group poses questions about the limits and acceptability of outré female behavior.

The nineteenth-century drawings, often dark and smudgy (the result of several washes), are intensely evocative. One thinks of a bleak London afternoon, the grate cold, the scene straight from Dickens or Joseph Conrad's *Secret Agent*. A number of these, and some of the most successful among them, are diptychs, which Glasson means to conjure stereoscopy. Stereoscopy typically consists of two illustrations, or photographs, placed side by side; they are blurry when viewed head-on, but seen through a special lens, they appear to merge into a single three-dimensional image. Glasson's drawings don't resolve into three-dimensions (she didn't mean them to); nevertheless, the juxtaposition of the two scenes in each diptych reveals new information, so that you see the overall work in a another dimension, so to speak.

The most successful among them, *How Unsuspecting and Innocent Old Gentlemen are Ingeniously and Photographically Covered by Confusion* (2009), consists of two nearly identical drawings of a woman reclining on a divan. In both, a photographer poses in the doorway, and a man, in top hat and tails, addresses the woman. In the image on the left, the woman takes on a typical feminine role: passive female posed for male contemplation and delight. But in the image on the right, the woman —even though her pose is identical to the other drawing—appears the seer, not the seen. This affect is the result of only minor differences: on the right, the man's body language is slightly submissive, and he holds his arm close to his side, in a beseeching manner, making him the unwitting object of appraisal suggested by the title. This strikes as revisionist history lite—or maybe simply wishful thinking that, in spite of what we know about history, the dominated may have had moments of dominating.

Indeed, Glasson says that one element that attracted her to *Sins of New York* was the illustration of women as "active as opposed to acted upon." Surely, they do take a firm hand in their pursuit of drink, lust, and sundry vices. But Glasson's statement strikes at the very core of the difficulty of being a woman artist. A fundamental part of art-school education is taking in the thousands of canonical images of woman as object. It's that process that is responsible for work by the likes of Lisa Yuskavage, whose paintings are grotesque, exaggerated, surreal takes on the female nude. It's the same frustration that drives the Guerrilla Girls, who in 2004 launched a series of posters that asked "Do women have to be naked to get into the U.S. museums? Less than 3 percent of the artists in the Met Museum are women, but 83 percent of the nudes are female." The feminist battle—as it pertains to women artists—is still being waged, even if, for this generation, or, at least, on Glasson's watch, the battle cry sounds somewhat softer.

Works from Glasson's contemporary series—which shows women dressed to the hilt, engaged in

faux-battle, their expressions often obscured by an arm or sweep of hair—raise questions about present-day boundaries of female behavior. For these images, Glasson photographed women "fighting" one another, then drew the scenes in ink. Some of the photos she staged; for others, she let her subjects act out scenes and pose on their own. The result is a collection of fight scenes that seem domestic and intimate, a visual metaphor for the competitiveness that characterizes even the closest female relationships. In *They Wet the Ribbon #1*, for instance, a blank-faced woman in a sleeveless dress stands with a leg poised to kick a woman crawling on the floor. On the surface, the narrative of the image is cruel: kicking a person while she's down. But what's startling is the aggressor's expression; her heart's not in it. She seems totally unsurprised and disengaged, and her leg is raised almost passively, suggesting that she won't kick too hard, if at all. Similarly, *They Wet the Ribbon #3* shows two women sparring—ostensibly. In truth, though, the woman on the right seems intent on opening a stuck jar, while the woman on the left throws a punch that is more love-tap than left uppercut. In the series *She Caught It Hot*, numbers 1 and 2 are alone in the sinister feeling they evoke—a result, perhaps, due more to Glasson's having coated each with a dark wash than to the images themselves.

All told, the vibe of these works isn't grrrl power but something more delicate and complex than that. They seem more to do with testing power and boundaries than acting out. Which, in a sense, is a not untrue reality for women of Glasson's—and, full disclosure, my own—generation. Absent codified modes of behavior, where do you draw the line? How seriously do you take your own power, and how far are you willing to go to express it? How do you know you have misbehaved until it's too late? Women in the historical images knew when they had misbehaved—society, men, and other women let them have it. Today, who else but your female friends to—politely—keep you in line?

It seems significant, too, that Glasson has chosen drawing as the medium to pose these questions. As Brett Littman, executive director of New York's Drawing Center, points out, in the nineteen seventies, women artists in graduate schools were often told, "Maybe you should just draw because that would be more ladylike." The result was that a whole generation of artists—among them, Barbara Kruger and Louise Lawler—"eschewed the idea of drawing for other media like photography, performance, and installation." But today, along with a resurgent interest in craft and so-called women's work, "a lot of the taboos around drawing built up around the seventies…have been broken down," says Littman, though he cautions that whether female artists are thinking about re-approaching drawing "is hard to say."


They Wet the Ribbon #3, 2009, Ink on paper (left), They Wet the Ribbon #5, 2009, Ink on paper (right).

Stylistically, what unites these contemporary images with the other pieces in *The Foulest of Shapes* is the illustrative, academic line that emerges in even the most washed-over and murky works—what Littman terms "high academic drawing taken with a twist." It's evident in the stripes on the male figure's pants in *Damsel With a Gun* and in the spokes of the wheel in *The Dizzy Disciple of Terpsichore Taken for a Ride*. You can see it in the *The Mazes of the Giddly Waltz*, too, in the ruffles and folds of the women's dresses and the star couple's hair (all works 2009). It's only in the drawings of contemporary women, though, that Glasson fully allows this tendency to emerge. And it's these scenes that allow one to do some Roberta Smith-ing: one thinks of Marcel Dzama's intimate, small-scale paintings, Chris Ware's comic strips, the surreal world of Kojo Griffin's part-bear, part-pig, part-human creatures engaged in such quotidian acts as talking on the phone and teaching a child to ride a bike. One is also reminded of Dasha Shishkin's cats, which she showed in a series of three large and intricate drawings at the 2005 P.S. 1 show *Greater New York*. The parallels are temptingly sexist (pussies fighting), but it seems that Shishkin, like Dzama, is doing the inverse of what Glasson is trying to do: Shishkin and Dzama create surreal worlds of personified animals engaged in feats of frightening cruelty. Glasson, by contrast, draws real people involved in fake violence. And here, it seems, something new is going on. Glasson, unlike her aforementioned peers, is something of a realist—if that's a possible designation for an artist influenced by illustration and academe—with a signal commentary on, and concern for, the past and present perception of women.

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View "The Foulest of Shapes" in *Guernica*'s art gallery here.