

Sussman, Matt. "San Francisco: Margaret Harrison, Intersection for the Arts." *Art in America* 98, no. 6 (June-July 2010): 194-95.

## EXHIBITION REVIEWS



Margaret Harrison:  
*He's Only a Bunny Boy  
But He's Quite Nice  
Really*, 1971/2010,  
watercolor and graphite  
on inkjet print, 16¾  
by 9½ inches; at  
Intersection for the Arts.

### SAN FRANCISCO

#### MARGARET HARRISON INTERSECTION FOR THE ARTS

However indebted to the practices frequently associated with feminist art of the '70s, or sympathetic to feminism's critique of gender and power, "feminist" art today tends to be described as such in passing, and with a decidedly softer punch. With its declamatory title, "The Bodies Are Back," British artist Margaret Harrison's recent show issues a convincing rebuke to those who regard feminist art solely in the past tense or downplay the continued necessity of envisioning a world in which the balance of power no longer skews against women.

The "bodies" in question are mostly from around the time of Harrison's first solo exhibition in 1971. British police deemed her drawings, particularly an image of Hugh Hefner as a near-nude Playboy bunny, "offensive," and shut down the show. A re-creation of that piece (the original was stolen), *He's Only a Bunny Boy But He's Quite Nice Really*, is included in "Bodies," as are original works and preparatory sketches, recent re-creations and photolithographs of other early pieces (many of the original incarnations have been lost) and new works on paper that

thematically connect with the older efforts. The effect is pronounced: "Bodies" is not a historical survey but rather a gathering of Harrison's long-running commentary on the politics of representation.

Harrison's intention has frequently been to scramble the terms of John Berger's famous formulation, "Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at." In watercolor, graphite and colored pencil, Harrison freely appropriates Vargas-style pinup art, comic books and commercial illustration, re-presenting the centerfolds, superheroes and models as regendered critiques of the visual sources she draws from.

A watercolor riff on Captain America (1971/1997) depicts the WWII-era character in partial cheesecake-style drag, with garters, high heels and pendulous strap-on breasts. A series of 1971 watercolors, cheekily titled "Good Enough to Eat," literalizes women-as-objects-to-be-consumed by sandwiching Betty Page clones between slices of bread.

Harrison's new work, much of it created last year, turns a gimlet eye on the art world, with mixed success. Her three takes on Manet's *Olympia*—in which various celebrities, living and dead, are swapped in the racially defined roles of reclining nude and servant (including Michelle Obama and Marilyn Monroe, respectively)—feel like so much empty pastiche. By contrast, the 2010 watercolor of a beaming Dolly Parton sitting beside Allen Jones's *Table Sculpture* (1969)—which provocatively uses a topless female mannequin on all fours as the base for a glass top—juxtaposes two kinds of plasticized femininity (though Dolly's is presumably of her own making) while also sending up Pop artists' objectification of women. It's refreshing that this pioneer hasn't lost what many of her feminist contemporaries were accused of lacking back in the day: a sense of humor.

—Matt Sussman