



CHRISTA DONNER AND HER LADY-FRIENDLY ART

Growing up, I received the art appreciation training that many people do. I understood and memorized the basic formula, ARTIST=MALE as I learned about the "masters" and those who had "revolutionized" the art world. It wasn't long before I started asking my teen-age self if there might be a way for art, feminism, and the lady-like to mingle. Then, years later, I met Christa Donner in Cleveland.

Christa gives it to me herself: "I have to keep working to make the art that I want to see out there, because it doesn't exist yet!" She manages to encompass themes of health, self-perception, body image, beauty standards, and consumer culture in drawings that by their very nature twist media images fed to women every day and force the viewer to evaluate their meaning. "When I was in school, I had a lot of preconceived notions about what art might look like if it centered around these themes, so I stayed away from them in my work for a while. Then I took a feminist art history class and realized there are a lot of ways to approach it."

Christa's art centers around images that immediately remind the viewer of fashion magazine spreads. The works are often large, and imposing fashion model-looking types stare back at the viewer with the recognizably distant supermodel glare. But images of their intestines emerge from their bodies along with leg braces, pop-up hearts, foam tracheas, real hair, and other scientific imagery to complicate the smug vapidness we're used to seeing as we flip through a fashion magazine.

"I'll usually spread out three or four images I'm really drawn to -- a certain pose in a fashion magazine, some old diagrams of the large intestine," Christa says. "Then I'll mix up a couple of colors that seem interesting or paste on an interesting collage item and start adding big flat areas of color to make shapes I see in the source material. Once I have something basic down, I start drawing over top of that with brush and ink."

The end result is an amazing thing: an image that immediately allows the viewer to recognize a fear of the body that is inherent for many women, the media pressure to focus on what it looks like rather than whether it's healthy, and a very visceral feeling that results from seeing arrays of guts, hair, and scientific process that levels the ordinarily intimidating supermodel imagery. It also speaks to the feelings of jealousy and self-abuse inherent in being a consumer of beauty culture. It takes the media into a totally different context, no longer asking you to measure yourself against the women presented in the images as you are usually asked to do when you pick up a copy of *Mademoiselle*, but rather compels you to relate to them on many levels.

Like the body, nothing is static in Christa's art-making process. "Invariably, I'll hate part of it -- the great thing about working on paper is that you can cut off parts you like, or glue other pieces of paper on top, which I do," she says. "That way of working almost echoes what we do with our bodies, via dieting, plastic surgery, and makeup, for example."

Often the influence of comics swims below the surface of the work. "I became interested in them after college. I love the narrative aspects of comics, and ideally I'd like my drawings to be sort of a bridge between people who are into 'fine art' and people who are into comics." Christa has been sneaking her work into the mainstream media, illustrating for *JANE* and drawing a comic for *Bust*.

As it does for many artists, the personal informs Christa's art. "I was always underweight and had half of the people in my life telling me I looked unhealthy, while the other half expressed jealousy that I fit into certain standards of 'beauty.'" She translated her discomfort into art following a stint in New York as a student. "I met lots of big-shot visiting artists and realized that all these people were doing was making art about their lives. I

mean, in the art magazines, critics would go on and on about the metaphors and the postmodern theory behind the work to try to explain it, but really most of these people were just making things they liked making about very specific personal things. It just came out -- my health, my relationships with others, and my insecurities were sideswiping my life and I had to address them. Now I try to use these experiences to reach other people."

Christa has used her art as a way to get teen-age girls thinking about body image and has hosted several workshops for young women. "I came up with a project that was basically a simplified version of what I do in my own drawings: pick your least favorite body part and use glitter, gold lame, stretch velvet, rhinestones, and fake fur to make it into the most fabulous, in-your-face, glammed-up collage on paper version of whatever. I like to give artist talks where people can ask questions, do a workshop or involve the public, especially young girls or women. I think it's one thing to make these drawings, but I feel a certain responsibility or need to make it go further than that." Recently, Christa has been reaching out to other members of the arts community, co-authoring an article in *Dialogue* magazine about "experimental" teaching methods that artists can use to reach out to students and the general public.

Christa's interest in the media spills over into the production of her own zine, *Ladyfriend*. "On the one hand, I'm making art that lets me examine and process my ideas about beauty, self-image, and jealousy. On the other hand, I'm making an alternative to those wack 'women's' magazines that are out there. It's another way of processing my love/hate relationship with magazines: making my own!"

See Christa Donner's artwork at her Web site:

<http://christad.homestead.com> and the Ladyfriend site at

<http://ladyfriend.homestead.com>.