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Art in Review

By ROBERTA SMITH

THE FEMALE GAZE:

Women Look at Women

Cheim & Read

547 West 25th Street, Chelsea

Through Sept. 19

This ambitious exhibition of 41 works by 40 artists manages to feel staid and aggrandizing and exciting all at the same time. The roster is short on interesting young artists and teems with usual suspects -- Diane Arbus, Louise Bourgeois, Nan Goldin, Alice Neel, Cindy Sherman -- including several represented by Cheim & Read. Opposing a "female gaze" to a "male gaze" is also a bit old hat. A lot has happened since 1975, when Laura Mulvey's groundbreaking essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" made the "male gaze" an art theory staple. For one thing, gender, sexual orientation, identity and even personality have come to be seen as increasingly fluid constructs. Who is looking at whom with what kind of gaze at any given moment is not always easily pinned down.

But focusing exclusively on portrayals of women by women opens an irresistible Pandora's box that in many ways substantiates these post-Mulvey developments. The various ways that the women here portray themselves or other women in painting, sculpture, photography, video and collage are just as often fraught with issues of power, desire, ambivalence, empathy and otherness as portrayals of women by men. Or put another way, how many of these images could just as easily be by men? More than a few. By sexist men? Well, there's Sarah Lucas's "Cigarette Tits II (Idealized Smoker's Chest II)" from 1999, a sculpture that conjures rebellious female debauchery with a side chair, two breastlike hemispheres covered with cigarettes and a black bra. Does it ridicule misogyny or take it to harsh, undeniable extremes that we fully understand only upon learning that the piece is by a woman?

The selection, made by John Cheim, one of the gallery's partners, is larded with telling surprises, back stories and juxtapositions. And if you factor in transvestitism, things get really stirred up. The surprises include Joan Mitchell's early painting of a black female nude whose proud stance recalls Matisse's "Male Nude Model," a painting from around 1900. Berenice Abbott's photograph "Mme. Théodore van Rysselberghe" portrays the formidably imperious wife of the Belgian Neo-Impressionist. She went on to become a close companion of André Gide -- so close that her daughter Elizabeth had a child by that French writer out of wedlock.

For juxtapositions, there's the real voluptuousness of Maria Lassnig's female nude "Girl With a Wine Glass" from 1971 and, facing it, the fantasy possibly masturbating sugar-plum nude tween of Lisa Yuskavage's 1996-97 "Heart"; Anh Duong's glamorous self-portrait across from the young girl of Alice Neel's "Olivia"; and Joan Semmel's image of hot heterosexual sex near Lynda Benglis's 1973 video "Female Sensibility," in which the artist makes out tepidly with another woman.

There are things here that are bland and uninteresting no matter who made them. But most of them, set down in this context, sustain a rich process of parsing and comparing. That little is neatly resolved along normative gender divisions may indicate how far feminist theory has come.

ROBERTA SMITH

PHOTO: Berenice Abbott's "Mme. Théodore van Rysselberghe" from "The Female Gaze: Women Look at Women."(PHOTOGRAPH BY CHEIM & READ)