**Kate Linker on “Subjects in Pictures”**

“Subjects in Pictures,” 49th Parallel

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This exhibition, organized by Philip Monk, presented the work of six Toronto-based artists. Its title involves a play on words, for, as Monk notes in his catalogue essay, it can speak of both content and individuality, “subject-matter and subjecthood.” In the latter, Monk is dealing with one of the capital topics of our era, for the representation of individuals in any work extends beyond their simple figuration to encompass reflection on the forms of subjectivity in society. To “picture” individuals in and as images is to comment on the social relations their appearances imply, and on the means by which subjectivity is constructed. But it is also to participate in this construction, for the image is society’s dominant mode of subjection, acting to structure identity through the mastering power of the look.

As Monk’s writing shows, his project is informed by the conjunction of psychoanalytic and semiotic theory which has been useful in unraveling ideological questions; it aims at a “non-subjective theory of subjectivity,” stressing representation’s determining role. In that these artists are women, his initiative is admirably direct, since it is women who are most subjected, due to their negative place within the social order of language, and who are therefore best “positioned” for critical comment. The six artists in “Subjects in Pictures” all employ the received images, text/picture relations, and disjunctive devices that have become common strategies in this field. However, accolades end here, as Monk’s theoretical means outstrip his matter.

My impression is that Monk is making overly elaborate claims for this work, or employing it as material for his own critical apparatus. In this way he places himself in a position of mastery, constructing identities for different artistic practices. It’s not that this art isn’t informed by theory: its texture and all-too-blatant references imply it. It’s just that this work is too inarticulate, too bumbling in its means to contribute a coherent statement on its field. Janice Gurney deals with the fragmentation of identity, while Joanne Tod paints vignettes conjoining woman, commodity, and power. Shelagh Alexander uses compilation photographs garnered from media sources to make illegible comments on narrative’s constructive role. And the gouaches of Nancy Johnson deal with self and other, subject and object, through a literal figuration of binomial terms. The “tragedy” of this work is that it requires Monk’s extended individual analyses—each longer than his initial catalogue text—to explicate and elaborate its themes. And, in so doing, it masks the most important questions it might raise under the mantle of critical force.

—Kate Linker

