

Something Shimmers, Something is Hushed Up: Kate Manheim at CUE Art Foundation

By Nora Griffin

“To turn a saint against a saint”

—Kate Manheim as Rhoda in *Strong Medicine*

Kate Manheim lives, works and dreams in a lair-like Wooster Street loft that evokes the bygone era of “Downtown” New York. Manheim is primarily known as a doyenne of avant-garde theater and is perhaps best remembered as Rhoda, a beloved changeling, equal parts muse and stand-in for playwright Richard Foreman. The couple collaborated in the Ontological-Hysteric Theater for sixteen years and since leaving the theater in 1987, Manheim has pursued a second life as a visual artist, realizing her vision in painting, collage, artist books and most recently through techniques of digital manipulation and printing. Manheim’s exhibition at CUE Art Foundation comprises all aspects of her art—from the gallows humor of her elegantly designed books to the *Totem Loki* and venereal disease collage series.

Kate Manheim’s first artworks were made when she was eight years old at the progressive art school, Academie du Jeudi in Paris. Her family (father Ralph Manheim, a well-known translator of Bertolt Brecht, younger sister Nora and poet mother Mary) had re-located from Springs, Long Island to France in 1950 when Kate was five years old. When I visited Manheim in her studio she showed me examples of the childhood paintings she made as a student at the Academie. Intimate in scale and created with gouache and pastel on paper and cardboard, the paintings describe a series of youthful visions. From Fauvist Parisian street scenes to a mosaic-like collage of Christ on the cross, all of the early paintings convey a remarkable structure and energy. The early influence of Van Gogh, Munch and Georges Rouault is palpable in the paintings’ vibrating color schemes and thick outlines. The young Manheim’s lightness of touch and evident absorption in religious and mythical subject matter also aligns her with “outsider” Modernist artists such as Bob Thompson and Forrest Bess.

The paintings reveal a religious intensity that is re-visited with a mature passion and discipline later in her life.

After nearly two decades of celebrated work in theaters in New York and Paris, Manheim enrolled as a student at Cooper Union in 1987. Her first forays into collage began with an artist book made during her time as a student, *Station VI (Vera-Ikon): The Real Thing*. The book juxtaposes a reproduction of Leonardo da Vinci's *Mandala* with meditative geometric gouache and pastel patterns. The painted design recalls Alfred Jensen's diagrammatic number and alphabet paintings. A mystic order is at work that is close within our grasp yet eludes any obvious interpretation or understanding.

Manheim's two artist books on display at CUE, *The Wandering Jew* and *The Joy of Cooking*, published in the late 1980s by her own Infinity Etc., are further explorations of her themes of mysticism, exile and folk art. Not to be confused with that other *Joy of Cooking* book, Manheim's *The Joy of Cooking*, is a photo-illustrated story of a haunting childhood memory. Inconspicuously printed in a school composition book, the story recounts her mother telling her to always mark her religion as Jewish on official forms so as "to be the first to be cooked in the ovens, packed together with the other Jews like sardines." The story ends with young Kate waiting for a future time when she too will be cooked in the ovens. There is an uncomfortable tension that follows the assimilation of terror into the language of humor. Above all, the books are about the transformation of trauma into a visual medium.

Manheim's *Totem Lokis* are images that resist singular classification or definition. They are the sum of many parts: textile patterns, swatches of recognizable Modernist paintings (Marsden Hartley is a favorite source) and computer-generated vortexes and distortions. Manheim refers to them as "paintings," but they are more like the ghostly dream of a painting. The outlined "Totem" image, first conceived in 2004, is an abstracted animal-like form, bestowed by Richard Foreman with the name "Loki," a shape and gender shifting God from Norse mythology. It is a fitting totem creature for Manheim since radical dualities have always played a significant role in

her creative life. In the 1981 film, *Strong Medicine*, Manheim's Rhoda is a compelling woman, equal parts hapless victim of terror and sharp talking wiseacre. Manheim describes Rhoda as "half man, half woman," a character who transcends traditional gender stereotypes.

The computer provides an enormous degree of separation from the origin of the painted image, allowing free-range experimentation within a prescribed area. It is a freedom that permits Manheim to tap directly into her unconscious mind. At CUE, the *Totem Lokis* are placed in close proximity to one another, covering an entire wall of the gallery. The display highlights Manheim's desire for the viewer to understand the images as pieces of a larger puzzle, stretching into infinity. There is an obsessive quality in the unabashedly garish mix of colors and patterns, the only focal point being the outlined "Loki" shape. There is no "outside" to the image, every shape is dutifully filled in with either a solid color or a pattern. The curving outline suggests a form burned into place—a solid stability at odds with the vibrating hues and swirls of the inside patterns. The identical external design of each *Totem Loki* combined with an infinite variety of interior motifs speaks to a desire on the part of Manheim to delineate a unique space for her vision. Through the ordered chaos of the image, a contemplative, private light shines through. It is as if all the art history, mythology and painting of Manheim's childhood coalesced into one organism, a *Totem Loki*, which was sliced open to reveal a pulsing network of forms.

Manheim's love of dualities, the sacred and the profane, is most audaciously displayed in her venereal disease collage series. Created in the late 1990s, the *VD* prints are realized through the same computer collage technique as the *Totem Lokis*. The religious imagery, German and Italian Renaissance paintings culled from Manheim's image library, are stand-ins for the mystery of religion just as much as the tender illustrations of venereal-infected genitals. Virgin Mary, Baby Jesus, saints and cherubs surround pearly pink flesh, rippled and encrusted with lesions, the symptoms of progressing infection. The myth context of religion, such as the virgin birth, is juxtaposed with the equally mythical phenomenon of sexuality and death. The source for the anatomical images is a 19th century medical textbook of venereal diseases,

purchased by Manheim from a Paris bookshop in 1986. The straightforward, exquisite gentleness of the illustrations is at odds with our contemporary idea of horror and ugliness that accompanies deforming diseases. Manheim locates an unintentional beauty in the image of disease and makes it her own by putting it through her computer-collage pattern system. The resulting collages transcend the grossly obscene or the purely medical to reach a state of surreal grace. In some of the images the mutating pattern appears as an infecting presence of disease, absolving barriers between medical illustration and painted figures. The *VD* collages reveal the artist's fascination with the uncanny, the metaphysical element hidden within the whimsically grotesque. Arcimboldo, the 16th century Italian artist who enigmatically painted human heads composed of fruit and vegetable bouquets, shares a similar interest. Manheim has explained that she could see the *VD* prints exhibited in a church, believing that the resonant mystery would outweigh a charge of obscenity.

Manheim's self-portrait photographs are the one explicit reference to a life in theater. The portraits are like masks, each describing an extreme state of being. Striking a chord between jubilation—absurdity and radiant hysteria, they depict Manheim made-up in white face, Manheim with a mysterious black-coated tongue, Manheim serving us a cool gaze. The portraits are extensions of her acting persona, a woman who slips between extreme emotions, absurd humor, violence, and a longing for connection. The photographs bear similarity to the *Untitled Film Stills* series of Cindy Sherman—poses in which the artist adopts a variety of feminine roles. However, in Manheim's photographs there is a personal intensity that trumps theatrical detachment. *Head Shot Bright Blue Sky*, shows a striking Manheim, sporting an elegant coiffure and shoulder pads, set against a semi-urban backdrop. The composition of a head and shoulders portrait against a hint of industry and landscape recalls the Renaissance portraiture of noblewomen and men. In *Mouth Gargling Water Bubble*, Manheim's eyes are wide open and her head is tilted, in her mouth is a crystal-like bubble of water. The photograph reveals a central motif in Kate Manheim's art: a mysterious exchange between the artist and her inner psyche, always hovering on the precipice of revelation.

Nora Griffin, Brooklyn, NY, October 2008

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The writer, **Nora Griffin** is an artist and critic based in New York. She graduated from Oberlin College, Oberlin, OH in 2005 and attended the Vermont Studio Center, Johnson, VT in 2006. Griffin is a frequent contributor to *The Brooklyn Rail* and *Artcritical.com*.

The mentor, **Phyllis Braff** served as an art critic for *The New York Times* for several decades and has written articles and reviews for art publications internationally. Other publications include *Bibliography of Twentieth Century Art and Architecture*, *Bibliography of American Art and Architecture* and essays for a number of monographs and exhibition catalogues. A former museum administrator and museum art curator, she has also taught art history, criticism and critical theory at the graduate and undergraduate levels and has received a number of grants and awards. She is currently co-president of the International Association of Art Critics-USA and is a former vice-president of the international organization, which is based in Paris, France.