

Marina Adams: Continuums

By Christine Licata

Flowing along shifting continuums, Marina Adams' most recent painting series is deceptively direct. Her work exists in the realm between aesthetic and cultural dichotomies or perhaps more accurately, the slippery juncture where they meet: an East and West mentality, the figurative and the abstract, flesh and fantasy along with the passionate and puritanical. Also among the unity of opposites present in her pieces are the individual mark of Modernism and the appropriation of Postmodernism. These contrasts, in essence are antithetical, yet alternately are concealed and revealed throughout Adams' work, each one ultimately transforming into the other.

Adams combines both the graphic line and sexual imagery from Eastern print erotica, such as Japanese *Shunga* and the Indian *Kama Sutra*. In her latest painting series, the influence of the *Ukiyo-e* movement, *Shunga*, is most evident. From as early on as the 16th century, the wood-block based prints were popularized by influential artists such as Katsushika Hokusai, and became the precursor to contemporary *Manga* and *Anime* comics. *Shunga* style erotica revealed sexuality in a manner that was free of religious stigma. Sex was explored in unabashed clarity, free from taboo and seeped in fetish and accessible fantasy—unlike in Western culture, where sex is burdened by centuries of sanctimonious restrictions.

Shunga, as with the *Kama Sutra*, were purely about pleasure. Despite the clean lines and overall flat brightly colored surface of the comic print style, the content delved into the tactile sensuality of the sexual act. Often exaggerating genitalia in seemingly impossible positions, *Shunga* focused on an open and raw physicality of intimacy without moral distraction, social codes, or hidden shame.

Throughout Adams' painting, such as with *Interior Moves* (2008), there is strong sense of Hokusai's compositions and figurative forms from his work, for example his print *Two Lovers* (ca. 1815). In contrast, overlaid and intertwined within Adams' closely-cropped, provocative, *Ukiyo-e* and Hokusai-esque influenced drawn lines are varying levels of transparent and opaque color fields that reference distinctly American artist Andy Warhol's *Camouflage* (1986-87) silkscreen prints and paintings.

The palette and forms within Warhol's iconic *Camouflage* series invoke an historical dialogue impossible to ignore. A challenge to the Abstract Expressionists, Warhol saw the military-designed landscape pattern as an opportunity for individually unique organic forms that as a whole were also imbued with inherent, mass-production value. The hand of the artist within his forms was also simultaneously the act of mechanical reproduction for a commercial means.¹ In *Camouflage*, nature and the all-encompassing Abstract Expressionist sublime are

¹ Thomas Kellein, ed., *Andy Warhol Abstracts*, (Kempen: teNeues Publishing Group, 1993), p 45.

colorfully flattened into an accessible, non-threatening beauty—or a “deeply superficial” one—a term Warhol once used to refer to himself.

In addition to the theoretical discourse of Warhol’s *Camouflage*, the patterns in Adams’ paintings behave as camouflage in its purest form—effortlessly distracting and tempting the eye away from a clear perspective of what lies beneath. At first glance, the shapes and contrasting color palettes dominate the compositions overall. Within the organic contours, both muted blues and greens along with fluorescent oranges and reds self-consciously conceal the evocative content beneath in varying degrees of opacity such as in *Breathing Room* (2007), *Walkabout* (2008) and *Early Dawning* (2007). The sensuously alternating translucent and solid forms both inhibit and elicit a sexual versus an asexual discussion. The camouflage patterns acts as barrier, rejecting the viewer’s advances with another nod to Warhol and a puritanical plastic ideal of intimacy while the partially-veiled erotica invite voyeurism.

Adams describes her work as containing a “slowness,” and upon a lingering, closer inspection the underlying lines of intertwined flesh beneath the abstract forms come through, suddenly shifting the balance of the visual dialogue to the figurative. The tightly cropped Hokusai-esque torsos and limbs extend beyond the edges of the canvas, suggesting enough to draw upon the mind, both consciously and subconsciously, a visceral desire to delve deeper, to complete the provocative and passionate gestalt.

For Hokusai, the beauty present within even the slightest hint of a single one-dimensional mark could expand into a living conversation—an entry perhaps to the vastness of the sublime:

At seventy-three I learned a little about the real structure of animals, plants, birds, fishes and insects. Consequently when I am eighty I'll have made more progress. At ninety I'll have penetrated the mystery of things. At a hundred I shall have reached something marvelous, but when I am a hundred and ten everything I do, the smallest dot, will be alive.²

Adams’ lines seek this aliveness. Challenging one to cross into, through and beyond the canvas, her work leaves just enough to the imagination to experience the interlaced limbs and torsos somewhere between emotions and intellect, bringing into question flesh and fantasy. Flesh is inherently about connections, defining our passions and manifesting our desires, rejections, beliefs and disillusion, while fantasy keeps the sensual messiness just out of reach.

Caught within this lusty banter, the abstract camouflage patterns become figurative, mimicking the very content they initially disguised. Eventually the abstract and the figurative begin to undulate and switch places, each one becoming a compliment to the other as the eyes shift focus over the canvasses. For example in *Naked Beauty* (2008) or *Venus in the Sky with Diamonds* (2007), the Warhol-ian camouflage takes part in becoming flesh-like forms and the Hokusai-esque lines of the body become compositional abstractions.

² The Hokusai Museum online, <http://www.book-navi.com/hokusai/hokusai-e.html> (accessed September 2008).

From 16th century *Shunga* to 20th century Pop, as much as Adams' paintings appropriate with a Postmodern sensibility, she never fully relinquishes the Modernist brush stroke. Whether it is the graphic line or color field, there is a lightness and texture that makes them Adams' alone. In Western society, where dualistic interpretations are the basis of our deductions, it simplifies things to think of aesthetic discussions in terms of separate movements with distinct identifiers: sublime and beautiful, abstract and figurative, intimacy and distance and the political and the personal in polarized, black and white terms. Adams acknowledges and confronts that inherently all supposed facts and ideologies are ephemeral forms that continually conceal and reveal themselves, ready to infiltrate the other and shift the balance at a moment's notice.

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Christine Licata is a writer, curator and graphic designer. She currently is the Assistant Curator at the Taller Boricua / Puerto Rican Workshop in East Harlem and Gallery Manager at AC [Institute Unlimited Direct Chapel] in Chelsea, both located in New York City. The mentor, **Eleanor Heartney**, is a Contributing Editor to *Art in America* and *Artpress* and has written extensively on contemporary art issues for such other publications as *Artnews*, *Art and Auction*, *The New Art Examiner*, the *Washington Post* and *The New York Times*. She received the College Art Association's Frank Jewett Mather Award for distinction in art criticism in 1992. Her books include: *Critical Condition: American Culture at the Crossroads* (Cambridge University Press, 1997); *Postmodernism* (Cambridge University Press, 2001); *Postmodern Heretics: The Catholic Imagination in Contemporary Art* (Midmarch Arts Press, 2004); *Defending Complexity: Art, Politics and the New World Order* (Hard Press Editions, 2006) and *Art and Today* (Phaidon Press Inc., 2008), a survey of contemporary art of the last 25 years from Phaidon. She is a co-author of *After the Revolution: Women who Transformed Contemporary Art* (Prestel Publishing, 2007), which won the Susan Koppelman Award. Heartney is a past President of AICA-USA, the American section of the International Art Critics Association. In 2008 she was honored by the French government as a Chevalier dans l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres.