



Susan Hauptman:  
*Drawn from the Heart*



## Face to Face

*All that we are showing is that art is still here, that it is striving for the new and unsaid . . .*

*We are showing that it lives, and that the artists . . . are, in the midst of catastrophe, recollecting what is the nearest, most certain and most durable: truth and craft.*

GUSTAV HARTLAUB, 1925

She looks at us, and we look back. In face, after face, after face, the gaze in Susan Hauptman's self-portraits is so intent, the charcoal and pastel drawing so finely wrought, the compositions of self and objects so enigmatic, that the beholder becomes spellbound. How to disentangle ourselves from this absorption? What do we take in first — the adroit grasp of realist drawing that makes form illusionistic and texture palpable? The stylized clothing design? Or that almost relentlessly solemn facial expression, which simultaneously reinforces and contradicts the bold confidence of these oversize meditations?

Hauptman's most frequent subject over the past twenty years has been herself, and she thinks of the eight self-portraits and three still lifes presented in this, her second, solo exhibition at the Forum Gallery, as sequential. Each picture works as both an autonomous image and a moment in an overarching narrative. Within that coherence, it is easy to recognize *Self-portrait by Prima Donna Bitch* as the entryway to this extended representation of self and situation. Here, the radiant halo attracts us first to the head and neck it frames, the thick materiality of the ring of gold leaf emphasizing its intimations of divinity and its blue tone background recalling the characteristic azure drapery of the Madonna. Within it, Hauptman's buzz cut white hair signals masculinity, illness, streamlined readiness for athletic competition. Her eyes are narrowed and directly focus outward, her mouth is firm, the depiction dispassionate.

This configuration — full face in frontal orientation, stern expression with penetrating stare, and encircling aureole —

is that of religious icons of the Greek and Russian Orthodox tradition. While those historical close-ups are typically rather harsh depictions of Jesus Christ, a famous predecessor is the mosaic of Empress Theodora at the church of San Vitale, Ravenna, Italy, who with her retinue faces across the choir a companion mosaic of her husband Justinian I, the Byzantine emperor (527–65), and his own attendants as they all attend to the Mass. In Hauptman's *Prima Donna*, the "Bitch" goddess suggests that she is about to earn her epithet by herself engaging in a face off. She conspicuously pulls at her white gloved fingers and enacts the verbal idiom "the gloves come off." A fight is ahead — and already on the garlanded cake before her the single candle penetrating the frosting's leafy rose is spewing fireworks. Adjacent, the brightly dotted cloth suggests a lady's handkerchief, but its placement complicates that identification. Juxtaposed to the circular cake and directly below the nimbus, its rectangular shape suggests the archaic division of curved, organic form as "female" and constructed, angular objects as "male." Hauptman's own androgynous appearance and blunt picturing suggests that it is just that sort of anachronistic dualism that she seeks to eradicate, or rather, merge, but meanwhile the opposition of round and rectangle noticeably remains before her.

The artist's previous show here of self-portraits and still lifes often included depictions of her husband, so much so that the images effectively became portraits of herself in marriage. No man appears in this recent series, but the consistent presence of a canine companion in each of these self-portraits except the first and the last suggests his displacement into a surrogate, "man's best friend." One of Hauptman's most dynamic catalyzing of charcoal and self-examination combines a stark picture of her face — without makeup, with dark expression — with the fantasia of an overly feminine costume and pooch escort. *Silver Self-portrait with Dog* shows her standing to the right of a wall wearing a strapless and intricately detailed evening gown. Four rows of crisp silvery

ruffles — drawn so as to call up pleated foil — span her bust above four columns of shirred crinkles across her midriff. As the folds of her full black chiffon skirt with dark bias stripes catch the light, they become shimmering silver threads. The downward sequence of sensuous textures culminates in the immediate foreground with the soft white tufts of the poodle standing by. And the coding of frilly feminism is augmented by her pose: with one arm folded behind her waist and the other white gloved hand pinching her skirt to hold it outward, it is as if she is ready to curtsy.

Despite the quasi-glamour, this is the posture of a little darling displaying her Sunday best to doting family. The three-quarters turn of her head above the frontal torso and broad skirt more specifically calls up the parallel position of the Spanish princess in Diego Velasquez's *Maids of Honor* (1656). There, the adorable *infanta*, herself wearing a fitted bodice and full skirt, is also viewed to the right of the prominent vertical edge of a painter's canvas. She similarly looks out at the viewer with a serious expression from a sidelong turn of her head and has a retriever at her feet. But Hauptman alludes to the structural affinities — whether intentionally or not, referring either to the generic embodiment of “sugar ’n spice” or the Baroque particularity — only to disrupt them. Despite her deliberate display of her costume and the spit curl that enlivens her crewcut, the severe expression below it suggests that she is anything *but* “made of . . . everything nice.” Even her pet frowns.

Most of the other self-portraits also display exaggeratedly feminine attire from mid- twentieth century decades when to be female meant to be feminine, and the social definitions of those constructs were more certain, and stable. Thus ruffles, lace, flounces, polka dots, veils, and corsages are all tried on by Hauptman in a parade of striking outfits — which make an odd contrast to her hairdo's refusal of sensuality by butch barbering and her steadily serious expression. The penultimate picture,



*Hair Self-portrait with Dog*, shows the subject in vintage beach wear. An ensemble of a boldly striped and narrowly strapped '40s sun dress is topped by a straw bonnet crowned with flowers and a silk scarf tied under her chin like a properly covered lady of a century or so ago by Winslow Homer. Again, she has skipped the corresponding facial makeup and refuses the social convention that women appear gracious and that they convey that welcome by *smiling*. She holds at her side a ridiculously enormous ball, brightly colored in red, yellow, and blue. Despite having again donned gay attire, and being ready for play with that zany ball, there's no fa la la la here — her eyes and mouth are even more grim. This time, *fido* is not displaying the *faithfulness* which he historically so often symbolized. Instead, the beautifully profiled hound with the velvety coat (which includes actual snippets of dog hair) is ambiguously crouching.

Across the series, this actress has taken off gloves and engaged in battles (“of the sexes”?) by putting on luxe, femininity, and girliness as epitomized by one outfit after another. All this, to no avail — discrepancy prevails, visually and emotionally. Yet the strong sense of disturbance is visualized not in shrieking diagonals and ragged strokes, but by a steady hand. The sense of disjunction between the frivolous attire and pensive expression, between intense emotion evoked by these discrepancies and its finely controlled presentation, recalls a similar duality in the crystalline realism of the inter-war German movement *Neue Sachlichkeit*. Rejecting the expressionist heat and gestural fervor by artists like Emile Nolde and Ernst Kirchner, coolly analytical images by Max Beckmann, Otto Dix, Georg Grosz and others were identified by Gustave Hartlaub as a reactive “New Objectivity.” Analyzing their drawings more recently, Hanne Bergius described the emphasis on line “as a defining contour to precisely detail concrete facts and ‘tangible’ reality which had urban man, his physiognomy and body, at its center.” Yet beyond the achievement of optical verisimilitude, the contradiction of excess unease and super con-

trol of technique suggests that in Hauptman's work, as the Germans', the precise contours function as a means of containing turmoil. Bergius noted, "The objectivity with which the city is observed and its dangers tracked becomes an apotropaim. Sober observation girds itself against fears, phobias, emotions . . . The process of drawing itself is presented as an act of defense: looking at the details protects one from looking at the chaotic whole."

In Hauptman's final picture in this group, a head-and-shoulders portrait set within foaming clouds in an ethereal sky, the subject is smiling. Her ears appear slightly more obvious than in other portraits — perhaps her hearing is the source of good news. Her shoulders have relaxed and are swathed in a sheer stole held by a small pink rose. Still with those dark circles, now her mid-life face radiates angelic light. Fido is notably absent. The Rococo froth is so incongruous within this group that it suggests a sudden swerve, a fantasy of a complete release from tension, and where else will that take place, but in heaven (and after death).

Hauptman's self-interrogations over the past two decades have participated in what critic John Welchman has called the art world's "new permission to examine the make-up of selfhood." Frequently the resurgent figuration enacts current critical theory's accentuation of the fluidity of identity, the concept of the self displaced as the center of creativity and instead thought of as determined by the contingencies of the social, verbal, visual languages through which it speaks. The consistency of Hauptman's sober demeanor, despite changes of festive clothing, replies to other women artists' masquerades of female personae by displaying another perspective. That is, that changing one's attire isn't enough: there *is* an authentic self that a costume can't either disguise or alter.

LIVE A LITTLE, Saks Fifth Avenue's fashion advertising campaign has been urging. We can all relate to the sense of vitality stimulated by looking good in beautiful garments. Hauptman's series demonstrates that playing dress-up did not provide her

protagonist — the representation of herself that she presents in her drawings — the requisite lift toward living it Up. No matter what she put on, she can't put herself on, she can't *tromp* her own *P'oeil* or fool herself into a smile. This is a brave revelation, and dramatizes an aspect of the human predicament: that such social masks are temporary, often worn to please others, and if the transformation needed is fundamental, do not work. In displaying her own conflicts and "catastrophes," akin to Hartlaub's epigraph regarding German artists of the 1920s Hauptman's exquisitely drawn span of self-portraits present compelling fusions of "truth and craft."

— SUZAAAN BOETTGER

Gustav Hartlaub's statement is from his introduction to the 1925 exhibition catalogue *Neue Sachlichkeit, German Painting since Expressionism* for the Städtische Kunsthalle Mannheim, as reprinted in *German Realist Drawings of the 1920s*, edited by Peter Nisbet, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Art Museum, Busch-Reisinger Museum, 1986). Hanne Bergius discusses the *Neue Sachlichkeit* in that 1986 catalogue, pp. 15 and 22. John Welchman's comment is from *Narcissism: Artists Reflect Themselves*, (Escondido, CA: California Center for the Arts Museum, 1996), p. 16, the catalogue for an exhibition in which Hauptman participated.

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