



Susan Hauptman: *Self-Portrait*, 1998, charcoal and pastel on paper, 54 by 38 inches; at Forum.

Susan Hauptman at Forum

Continuing with her signature subject, Susan Hauptman's nine large self-portrait drawings in her first show at the Forum Gallery are mesmerizing. Compelled by Hauptman's pensive visage, which so intently confronts the viewer, and seduced by her mastery of charcoal and pastel, a singular fusion of photographic realism and textural finesse, we are drawn into her meditation and to the objects with which she figures her self-representation. The dominant theme of these works, all from the last three years, is her gender, and correspondingly, her relation to the male presence which accompanies her

in various ways.

As if to counter her facility for conjuring verisimilitude, Hauptman employs a strategy that accentuates artifice. The faces are strongly modeled and closely observed—wrinkles, under-eye circles, grimace lines and all—while the bodies are smoothly generalized. This discrepancy evokes a head thrust through a hole in a board above a flatly painted figure, as at a fairground. As in earlier works, Hauptman's costumes—a ruffled dress, a grass skirt, a retro beaded

sweater—suggest different personae. Sporting buzz-cut hair and a strapless black cocktail dress that reveals developed biceps, she offers a radically tilted cake ostentatiously frosted with swirls and gold leaf. An upside-down male head floats above the cake. In another drawing, Hauptman's sober countenance contrasts with her perky satin bow, recalling Watteau's melancholic clown Gilles. She holds the hand of her male companion below a windowsill containing a vase decorated

with pairs of plump berries.

The catalogue essay identifies the man as the artist's husband, writer Leonard Post. With his sometimes fragmentary appearance in all nine self-portraits, and with allusions to a masculine presence in the two smaller still lifes also on view, the compositions become portraits of the artist in marriage. There can be conflict, as when the man's black-gloved hand makes the sign of a gun and points toward Hauptman's exaggeratedly protruding ear. Frowning and wearing a mannish argyle sweater, she sits at a table bearing an ornamental vase decorated with an embracing couple and a plate with a dark ring and radiating marks that suggest the pain of a stretched orifice. What a choice! Elsewhere, framed by frilly kitchen curtains and wearing a gauzy embroidered dress, Hauptman holds at her waist a bulbous vase that is tinted celadon (the only color in the picture) and features the man's black-and-white profile. Her expression is almost grim, even as he is symbolically filling her, occupying her womb. Hauptman's complex consciousness of herself as an artist/maker and woman/wife challenges us to look as closely as she does. —Suzaan Boettger