

BY L.P. STREITFELD

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

Artemisia Gentileschi (1593-1652) inserted her self-portrait into allegorical paintings that reflected her dramatic life story. In her own time, she achieved fame and fortune through a very modern process of transforming her personal misfortune — rape by her teacher made scandal through a public trial — into art.

Feminist scholarship has brought Gentileschi's work into new public recognition ("Orazio and Artemisia Gentileschi: Father and Daughter

Painters in Baroque Italy" was at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in early 2002). Yet, there exists no aesthetic or theory to support the female struggle to create a transcendent art rooted in a personal mythology. Women who create personal art about their own search risk the narcissistic label. Worse, those who mine their personal lives for the sake of art place themselves at peril of being overwhelmed by the unconscious, as was the case of Camille Claudel, who died in an insane asylum.

At Silvermine Guild Galleries this month are two female artists who utilize their own body image to create art reflecting a personal journey. Camille Eskell has been making art out of the relics of her family lace business. In the entrance gallery, her piercing "Resurrections: Of Brutality & Grace" consists of mixed-media sculptures made from casts of her own body parts.

In an adjoining gallery, Veronica Hart paints her likeness into "Contemporary Realism: Portraits" that strive for a personal mythology.

Without sentimentality, Eskell utilizes autobiography (the exhibition is dedicated to the memory of her late sister) to draw the viewer into the natural cycle of life/death/renewal. This culmination of her longtime "Tattooed Lady" series of truncated torsos and "For Keep's Sake" series of keepsake boxes and display cases, which symbolize containment and preservation, integrates a range of media (drawing, painting, assemblage and sculpture) with exacting technical skill. In the heroic balance reflected by its title, this powerful and timely exhibit evokes the death and resurrection of Venus in the underworld.

In this contemporary rendering of an ancient myth, objects are conscious relics of the artist's personal journey of transformation. Utilizing the material (lace) of her family history to inscribe a painful process of surrender to the unknown, Eskell's art employs symbols to guide an illuminating voyage into the interior of our bodies and psyches. Suspended from the ceiling to emphasize the lack of limbs, the "Tattooed Lady" series conveys a universal narrative of birth ("Strange Fruit"), decay ("Coming Up Roses") and rebirth ("The Raising of Lazarus"). The final work in the series, "Resurrection," dominates the gallery space with the possibility of movement; the torso has feet attached to crutches serving as legs.

Hart's autobiography largely consists of painting her self-portrait into faux mythological narratives. Her "Headhunters" references Artemisia Gentileschi's famous "Judith Slaying Holofernes," which was a powerful dramatization of the artist waging revenge on her rapist through the bloody severing of consciousness, represented by the head. Yet, Hart's art is not deep enough to reflect salvation. The quality she creates with oil on canvas is luminous and rich; the effect is like painting on velvet. The content remains on the richly brushed surface. Moreover, her struggle to elevate the every-day object to ritual symbol reflects the need of the female heroine to reconcile with the Old Masters; for instance, a



"Tattooed Lady: The Raising of Lazarus" by Camille Eskell



"Tattooed Lady: Comin' Up Roses" by Camille Eskell



"Tattooed Lady: Resurrection" by Camille Eskell

frying pan wielded as a weapon in "Kitchen Warrior" and household Aluminum wrap forming African Headdress in "Foiled". The effect is both glib and self-mocking.

Surely, the inner journey is painful; Eskell's marked torsos are testimony to this inevitable truth. Harts statement says that she backed away from artistic expression in favor of illustration because figuration had fallen out of fashion. History has taught us that artists who have pursued the lonely path of outcast have something to offer during a cultural shift. Indeed, realism has a newly

found purpose in a post-9/11 humanistic environment. Yet, without the essential artistic development needed to deliver the personal portrait into the realm of the universal, the viewer is left confused, disorientated and disturbed by personal autobiography.

Surrounded as we are by the Popular culture commerce of illusion and its emphasis on youth and perfection, we need art more than ever to portray truth. "Of Brutality and Grace" offers spiritual redemption for those willing to surrender to the unfamiliar ancient image of duality in beauty. Ultimately, the conscious spirit embedded in Eskell's symbol-

laden realism makes peace with the toll the material world extracts from our soul; this bodes well for a reconciliation between humanism and art.

"Resurrections: Of Brutality and Grace" and "Contemporary Realism: Portraits" are on view with Fran Henry-Meehan's "A Kaleidoscope of Journeys," Sergio Gonzales-Tornero's "Cadmi-um Red" and Elaine Feiner's "Riverscapes" through April 23 At Silvermine Guild Art Center, 1037 Silvermine Road, New Canaan. Gallery hours are Tuesday-Saturday, 11 a.m.-5 p.m.; and Sunday, 1-5 p.m. Call 966-9700.