

PURCHASE, N.Y.  
 "THE DECONSTRUCTIVE  
 IMPULSE"  
 NEUBERGER MUSEUM OF ART

"The Deconstructive Impulse: Women Artists Reconfigure Signs of Power, 1973-1991," organized by Helaine Posner and Nancy Princenthal for the Neuberger Museum, is a highly entertaining and groundbreaking exhibition that should be required viewing for anyone interested in the evolution of contemporary art. The curators propose a new narrative arc for the transition from modernism to postmodernism, featuring well-known works by 22 artists, among them Dara Birnbaum, Sarah Charlesworth, the Guerrilla Girls, Jenny Holzer, Mary Kelly, Barbara Kruger, Louise Lawler, Martha Rosler, Cindy Sherman, Carrie Mae Weems and Hannah Wilke—demanding, instigating and even physically embodying the enormous paradigm shift.

The high production values, visual slapstick and omniscient narrator so fundamental to effective advertising became the stock-in-trade for postmodern art as well. Signal works by many of these artists functioned perfectly as art-historical sound bites, frequently reproduced, often without context. The large-



gelatin silver print *Walking House* (1989), in which a model home rests jauntily atop Barbie's plastic-perfect gams. Lynn Hershman's awareness summoned "Roberta Breitmore," a disheveled, traumatized alter ego that embodies a kind of pathetic or "failed" femininity (present here in a C-print). Judith Barry's video *Casual Shopper* (1980-81) brilliantly sends up shopping as both seduction and a form of self-love. Backed by a throbbing electronic beat (think porn), a man and woman pursue one another through a shopping mall, riding escalators, melting into stands of mannequins and blankly fondling the merchandise while checking their reflections in mirrors. Shot in early video's soft focus and high-key color, the actors look like they walked off the set of "Dynasty" and straight into the psychodrama and ennui of everyday life.

If the exhibition reminds us of how esthetically satisfying the mechanical reproduction can be, it also revisits famil-

iar arguments about the relationship of authenticity to facture. In the paintings on view—among them Sturtevant's *Warhol Marilyn* (1973); Sherrie Levine's *After Stuart Davis* (1983), *After Malevich* and *After Joan Miró* (both 1984); and Deborah Kass's *Read My Lips* (1990) and *Before and Happily Ever After* (1991)—the "hand" is used as a means of possessing, impersonating and undermining the great male artist of the modernist canon.

And then there's the hand of Adrian Piper. In the "Vanilla Nightmares" series (1986-88), expressive charcoal drawings of naked bodies crawling over the pages of the *New York Times* disrupt "all the news that's fit to print." The headlines forecast the demise of apartheid, but Piper's awkwardly articulated, intense renderings feel completely current. The Cubists used newsprint to usher their paintings into the Machine Age; Piper's coupling of type and hand tracks hers into the dirty underbelly of late capitalism and into contemporary art, where it remains ensconced.

—Carrie Moyer



scale, black-and-white Polaroids in Lorna Simpson's *Stereo Styles* (1988), for example, center on the repeating image of the artist's head from behind, coiffed in 10 different sculptural African-American hairstyles, paired with descriptors such as "long and silky," "country fresh," "severe" or "ageless." Epigrammatic and indexical, *Stereo Styles* could be a proxy for all "identity" art. Yet one of the accomplishments of "The Deconstructive Impulse" is that it restores a specificity to each artist while placing her within a much larger frame of reference.

Garrulous, opinionated, insinuating, cryptic or cutting, each work in "The Deconstructive Impulse" becomes part of an obstreperous dialogue on the nature of power in all its forms. The loudest "voice" is that of a brainy, caustic girl stuck in the normative fantasy of "Ozzie and Harriet." The generation of American artists born during the 1940s and '50s were the first to embrace critical theory as a means of exposing and eviscerating the machinations of family, state and (especially) the corporation.

As an earlier generation of women Pop artists knew, the "problem" for women artists is that they will always be subject, object and maker simultaneously. This triple burden is borne lightly in Laurie Simmons's life-size

Top, Deborah Kass: *Before and Happily Ever After*, 1991, oil and acrylic on canvas, 72 by 60 inches.

Above left, Lorna Simpson: *Stereo Styles*, 1988, 10 black-and-white Polaroid prints, 24 $\frac{3}{8}$  by 23 $\frac{3}{4}$  inches each.

"The Deconstructive Impulse" travels to the Nasher Museum of Art, Duke University, Durham, N.C., Aug. 24-Dec. 5, and the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, Feb. 11-Apr. 19, 2012.