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SELF - PORTRAITS PAINTER RUTH DEALY

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SELF-PORTRAITS PAINTER RUTH DEALY



THIS IS THE VISUAL EQUIVALENT OF RAYMOND CHANDLER MEETS JAMES JOYCE.

sky, definite, incisive brush strokes, and angular disjointed forms that indicate Dealy's continuing absorption with the beauty of color and pure form articulated in space. Her evident withdrawal from earlier references to more conventional pictorial prettiness indicates a deliberate movement towards strength and an undiluted, if harsher, beauty. This piece, taken in conjunction with *Self-Portrait in Red Bra*, and the more recent *The Dutch Portrait*, in which Dealy says she wanted to paint herself as a burgher, may require a feminist interpretation.

While Dealy has said that she prefers not to be viewed primarily as a woman painter, the historical context in which her work is received necessarily implies a feminist interpretation. The intense scrutiny and frankness with which she regards herself is not automatically an issue of gender, but the objects that result — the paintings — are, if only because of the conventions of the society into which they are received. As John Berger, the noted English art critic, states: "Harsh truth aids liberation." These are very deliberately made paintings, concerned with honesty and directness, and not dictated by convention. If some questioning or twist of convention should result, all the better.

Ruth Dealy's exhibition, *Sleep in Spite of Thunder*, will be at the Providence Art Club, May 5th through May 28th, and at AS220, May 1st through May 31st.

Above: The Dutch Portrait, 60"x60", acrylic on raw canvas.

FISH BUNDY is a writer and a painter. Bundy writes regularly for the Nice Paper, and recently exhibited at AS220's downstairs gallery.

what is it that makes today's Ruth Dealy so luminous, so difficult, so appealing?

Imagine you are in a room full of huge, figured paintings. You're facing a canvas of a single enormous head, the flesh of which is composed of crisscrossing, violently-colored twisting lines of paint that knit unerringly into a solemn, almost angry, confrontational stare. These lines are like maps; deliberate, difficult tracings of both tangible form and the undercurrent of things imagined. You turn and the room is full of Dealy's enormous self-portraits: full of luminous exaggerated color, intricate but spontaneous and unlabored drawing, and entirely, abjectly, full of emotional weight.

This is the visual equivalent of Raymond Chandler meets James Joyce. Dealy's dispassionate, informed eye for space, color, and descriptive detail goes up against her compulsively confessional emotional realism. In May, Dealy will show concurrently at AS220 and the Providence Art Club. Whether people will be engaged by Dealy's huge and confrontational self-portraits will depend on their willingness to respond to that confrontation. While the works can be appreciated and lingered on for pure painterly qualities, such as color and brushwork, they cannot be understood without entering the area of person and emotion. These are, above all, humanist paintings.

Dealy's work has always been straightforward and even generous, both visually and iconographically. Her newest paintings are even more straightforward. They are increasingly bare and direct in both painterly terms and intent. This work has its own peculiar kind of nuance.

What is most remarkable about Dealy's newest work is the look of anger that emanates from certain figures' faces, the sense that the painter has fully scrutinized herself and is not willing to back down. In earlier works, Dealy portrayed herself more passively,

sometimes presenting herself as a possible victim. One earlier piece, *Self-Portrait with Red Hand*, focuses on a woman whose hand might either be mangled or blood-smeared, while a nearby female torso, head barely apparent, writhes nakedly in what could either be pain or pleasure. This latter figure exists not as a person, but as a female body with indefinite emotions. Neither woman is depicted in an active role, and the confusion of pain and pleasure in the latter figure stands in stark contrast to some of Dealy's latest work.

In one of Dealy's newest paintings, *Self-Portrait in Red Bra*, she stands staring at us plainly; her portrayal of herself harsh. She masculinizes her face and robs it of all softness, yet frankly and affectionately records all the softness and folds of her overweight, aging and semi-nude body. This is one of the least apologetic paintings possible to make, and there is no obscuring of the subject. The scrutiny Dealy directs at herself is inescapable, and some viewers may feel they themselves are naked and the object of scrutiny.

Another of Dealy's newest pieces, *The Judgment of Paris*, refers textually to the traditional societal division of female intelligence and beauty. The painting itself consists of parts of torsos, slices of shocking blue

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