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76 GRAND STREET NEW YORK NY 10013



PIA DEHNE

Naked City

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76 Grand Street

Steve LaFreniere: What's your new project?

Pia Dehne: It's the cover of Jimi Hendrix's "Electric Ladyland". But I reconstructed the original photograph and put all my girlfriends in it instead.

S: Oh, the British cover with all the nude women?

P: Yes.

S: This is going to be a large painting?

P: 9 by 18 feet. The original picture is kind of dark, and it's interesting how women looked in the '60s. They had this flesh that was really soft and not "trained". Now the bodies are like steel. So I thought, maybe I should compare this.

S: Was it difficult to get the women to do it?

P: No, everyone I asked wanted to be in it. They all came to the shoot. It was like a party, and the picture turned out great.

S: What differences did you discover between then and now?

P: Women seem more empowered and in charge now, and I think their bodies reflect that. Also, since I came to New York I've experienced a very strong friendship between women, and I think this is also a sign of our times.

S: I used to see you at so many parties and openings. I began to think you were some sort of spy. Then I saw your book and realized I was right!

P: (laughs) Well, I'm an observer, a watcher, and a voyeur. I'm kind of a social animal who loves to take pictures of people.

S: Toulouse-Lautrec would sometimes say that he was merely an illustrator. His social milieu was the art.

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P:Toulouse -Lautrec was more like an outsider who admired the social milieu. I see myself more as a part of the society I am drawing. Being with others who are glamorous and celebrating is also source material for my work that turns my own life into art. Desperation and Celebration goes very close together.

S: As in "I'm so happy I could die"?

P: Yes.

S: You're also able to meet people this way.

P: Yes. Sometimes I have also sex with them.

S: Any portrait is half for the person being portrayed and half for the artist. I've always thought that was a strange bargain.

P: In this series I transform the people being portrayed into heroes or survivors of our time...and I think being a hero in an artist's personal

diary would make someone feel flattered...?!

S: These are drawings made after snapshots you've taken. I've always believed that the impetus behind taking snapshots was to claim some tiny bit of ownership of the subject.

P: So is writing fiction or a novel.. Anyway, don't you own the moment you experience with a person or situation? It's just a different way of visualizing.

S: Do you actually enjoy all the parties and events that you go to for your subjects?

P: There are times I felt I had to go to every f'kn single party. It almost became an addiction and going out especially late at night made you part of a secret union where you felt comfortable in the role of a spy--seeing and hearing what other people are up to. I also enjoy connecting people and being connected. But there are also times where you're afraid of everybody and you feel totally disconnected. That means time to work in your studio.

S: How much of the original photo do you use?

P: In the end I don't really need the photograph anymore. It's more like a crutch, a place to start. This combines with memory and I completely lose myself to the drawing. I see myself more like an abstract artist. I transform form and content, and try not to think. Otherwise, I would just show the photograph instead of the drawing.

S: That's interesting, because what I most like about them is this abstract quality they seem to produce.

P: Thanks..that's exactly what I'm trying to do...

S: Besides their formal considerations, these are portraits of a certain scene in New York right now. Young people doing creative new things, the kind that cause ripples in the larger culture.

P: The nice part about that "young scene" is that you can still see so much hope. That also carries a lot of glamour with it, which I'm addicted to.

S: Now, you also make monumental paintings from the same kinds of snapshots. But somehow those have a rather different feel.

P: Yes, and besides the more documentary aspect of my drawings, I think painting itself is more of a mystery. There is that rhythm, which leads to it's own rules, or like music tripping away but being in control of an instrument. I think color, form, and surface should rule the content.

There is always something going on which is unique. That's why I also have human beings as my subject. They have the same quality, this mystery.

This interview between Steve LaFreniere and Pia Dehne is reprinted with the approval of www.theblowup.com.

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