



Left, Helene Brandt: *Sphinx* (1989); right, Adrian Piper: *Merge* (detail, May 1989)

NANCY CHUNN. Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, 31 Mercer Street, through June 3.

HELENE BRANDT. Trabia-MacAfee Gallery, 54 Greene Street, closed.

NANCY SPERO: Works Since 1950. The New Museum, 583 Broadway. Part 1 through June 11; part 2, June 14 through July 9.

ADRIAN PIPER: Merge. Spectacolor lightboard, One Times Square, through May 31.

When Nancy Chunn was painting Cambodia as strips of bacon and El Salvador as liver, she'd buy models at the butcher. But she never eats meat. Chunn struggles against a primary dread of flesh by "incarnating" the bodies of lands and waters she has been painting since 1981.

Chunn is hardly alone in the dilemma that occupies the center of her art practice. Awareness of the wide-ranging, constantly shifting social implications of the personal, material body is acute right now. Because posers of U.S. citizens war for control of American creatures (fetuses, children, soldiers, animals) while sanctioning wholesale slaughter in the Third World hot spots Chunn paints, one is tempted to leave one's body, if just for a moment's relief from carnal conspiracy in the madness. But discourse among parts of the body politic is first of all physical in nature. No one can enter the struggle as dead meat or a brain in a jar, hoping to become a living, speaking subject. It is precisely for this living, speaking subject that Chunn labors.

Ronald Feldman's north gallery is devoted to a look into Chunn's complicated creative process, including notes about and studies of one painting. In the front room, where six exquisite large paintings (maps of Ethiopia, Korea, the Philippines, Iran/Iraq, Kurdistan, and Haiti/Dominican Republic) hang, this struggle to embody can be sensed in an extraordinary formal tension. Closely modulated, elaborately mixed colors are laid on in many thin skins, remaining close to the bone. Darkly radiant, these paintings are never sumptuous. Chunn's strict restraint of means and tight structuring wrap the conflicts that are inherent in her subject

matter and her compositions into a dynamic deadlock. The dichotomy declared in a title like *Haiti/Dominican Republic: Terror in Paradise* materializes when Chunn joins two separate canvases to paint the island whose two nations pull apart in opposite directions. Chains and outlines hold the form while muzzling and binding its parts. Chunn's visual language is active and ambivalent, always pondering the uneasy relationships between body/image, social environment, and collective identity.

Helene Brandt has fashioned steel-barred cages, cradles, bridges, and thrones to her own body since 1979. When I visited her studio in April, she

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demonstrated her earlier sculptures' perfect fits by scrambling onto a high chair, lying flat on the bed of a wheeled chariot, and climbing into wings she could "wear" like armor or a stiff body stocking. The individualistic shapes and tautly rendered construction of these works promised sanctuary and healing. As personalized enclosures they were equally restricting, self-imprisoning environments-for-one. Navigating between utility and desire, Brandt sought out autonomy alone and in depth among her own handmade "ashbins," such as Samuel Beckett described in *Endgame*. "Making them and getting in and out of them gave me courage," she said. Gradually the number of bars decreased until, by 1988, she was no longer making enclosures around her own body.

The six recent sculptures just shown at Trabia-MacAfee Gallery are freestanding soaring steel lines each supported by three light feet. Although similar in size to earlier sculptures, their scale has ex-

panded because they are no longer made to the artist's actual measurements. Yet she hasn't given up a physical place for herself at the center. The conceptual core of each of the new works is a "seat of power" made to fit a 12-inch wooden mannequin, a scale-model stand-in for the artist.

In a charcoal drawing, *Shadow Sphinx*, a primal scene unfolds. Two versions of *Sphinx* (the sculpture that stood in a corner beside the drawing) occupy a spotlighted stage. Serpentine, volitant tongues animate the power/center of the figures. These tongues thrust in a dual duel with—or at least engage in a tongue-lashing of—a funky primordial beast whose weapon is also lingual. The active tongue, instrument for the earliest struggle for identity, has been drawn here as an emblem of this artist's rite of passage.

Tongues stick out from wide-open mouths and penis-planes shit bombs at random targets in two forceful series included in "*Nancy Spero: Works Since 1950*" at the New Museum. Spero's "War Series" (1966 through 1970) addressed the devastation of Vietnam and explored the archaic impulses that create war. Images of angry eroticism and excremental savagery were to be, as well, Spero's embryonic enunciations on personal and common freedom—depictions of violent tugs-of-war with the environment for control of her subjects' bowels and souls.

Antonin Artaud complained of losing his tongue. At the end of 1964, when Spero returned to the United States from France and settled in New York, she purchased an anthology of Artaud's works. Artaud exemplified an artist's suffering, both mental and physical, in the world at large and in a bourgeois society in partic-

ular. Artaud's political and artistic alienation brought Spero's outsider status into focus for her. And she used protruding tongues in her "Codex Artaud" paintings of 1971 and '72 to break her silence.

Spero's tongues issue from her own wish to speak: a first, original approach to life, and her depiction of finding one's own voice. "I had a tongue and at least a part of the language of the world," she has said. Figures and parts of figures open their mouths as physical entrances to and from the self: their tongues, the bridge that allows reciprocity between self and the world, sensation and the intellect, sexuality and politics. A swastika extends from one swordlike tongue, a snake converses with another, presenting in literal terms the equation that the power to direct discourse is the power to create culture. As gestures of social subversion, Spero's tongues are not only instruments of vituperation and irony, but, rejecting passivity, of speech and (as Adrienne Rich put it) the dream of a common language.

Adrian Piper's *Merge*, the most effective Spectacolor lightboard I've seen in the Public Art Fund's "Messages to the Public" program, tackles the scary proposition of humans coming together. In public yet. But there is real animation interest, and fun too, in Piper's playful approach. Two identical yet differently colored Pac-Man-type faces move toward, through, and away from each other. The "merging" takes place most noticeably in the eyes, noses, and mouths, these making a kind of composite centralized face for a moment. And each time the two faces intermingling, their color patterns change. People, Piper thinks, become physically more like one another from being together. She considers the visible alterations in the players as they merge—evidence of their encounter—to represent the repetitive, cyclical generation of racial intermixture. Transcending the boundaries of one's self to enfold another, losing the self only to be forced to recover one's personal edges and move on, are facts of human interactions. And as that process moves, civilization is shaped. ■