

# KITTY BROPHY

Downtown Clifton

Tucson

September 2015

Eschewing patrician Phoenix for Manhattan in 1978, Kitty Brophy immersed herself in a fervid downtown art, music, and fashion scene that spawned historically important and influential creative effusions. Quickly falling in with such luminaries as Anne Magnuson, Tseng Kwong Chi, Keith Haring, Kenny Scharf, Jean-Michel Basquiat, John Sex, and Klaus Nomi, she attended the Parsons School of Design and pursued her art, a compulsive vocation she has followed ever since from Los Angeles to Hawaii to where she now resides, Tucson, Arizona.

The drawings in this exhibition from the late 1970s and early 1980s are indicative of the debauchery, decadence, and fun of that distinctly New York milieu, while in their deviant inventiveness and kinky sensibility are unmistakably her own. An essential (and acknowledged) debt to the inky dissipation of Aubrey Beardsley is the starting point, but Brophy hurdled past that particular touchstone to create a world that summons up fin-de-siècle Vienna, Weimar Berlin, the 1982 cult film “Liquid Sky,” and agitated visions from her own intricate psyche. A spiky and barbed drawing style and caustic, uncomfortable wit co-exist with Leopold Von Sacher-Masoch’s Venus in Furs and near-madness translated through true-life experience at storied nightlife and performance locales such as Club 57 on St. Mark’s Place. Slinky New Wave dominatrixes wearing skinny ties and eye masks, avian-headed nude women in high heels, entwined bodies bleeding from dripping daggers, it’s a dark, gallows domain by turns thrilling, foreboding, titillating, and occasionally abhorrent. Fishnet stockings, cinched waists, spiked collars, jodhpurs and whips, these are fetishistic to the extreme, bypassing base conceptions of obsession for a realm infinitely more charged and psychologically complex. A punkish, snotty attitude and look meets a deeper well of painful conflict, with a kinship to Unica Zurn’s tortured, surrealistic output. For evocations of angst, malaise, ferocious sexual degradation and pleasure these works have few rivals, threading together the grotesque with Art Nouveau elegance.

More recent offerings are just as visceral or even more so, and weirder, as she has diligently continued apace. Beautiful line drawings of vaginas and daisy-chained penises are reminiscent of Ellsworth Kelly flower studies, masterpieces of explicit simplicity. There is also text, which has been there from the beginning, ever scathing and clear-eyed. “Anna,” bald, her shorn pubis to the viewer, is accompanied by “So we drank coffee/champagne/smoked cigarettes/snorted coke/ate valium/shot heroin and starved ourselves for fashion” and ends with “I made it out/but will always be in/simpatico with the xxxxxx/and the beautiful wreckage/laid out like tracks/train train fucking train.” Self-excoriation in self-portraits, flights of Sci-Fi fantasy with lizards on leashes about to penetrate submissive figures, her art shifts effortlessly from the straightforward to the allegorical. Even more assured, advanced, and corrosive than what came before, buoyed by a world-weary and wickedly droll sense of humor.

Unafraid of frank depictions and crucially infused with frank attitudes and nuance, a candid eroticism prevails without any of it being quite “erotica.” Instead, toxicity, seduction, and repulsion do battle with emotional heft. Neither is this pornography, since imagination wins out over literality. Beyond the subject matter it’s good art, sex or not. Equally sensuous and intellectually stimulating, they recall another under known figure, Anita Steckel, who died in 2012. Steckel, who lived and worked most of her life in a small studio in Greenwich Village, told interviewers she always felt a tension between being a woman who liked men and being an artist who chafed at the limits that men had historically placed on women. Intending to establish the right of women to make art from the male figure, just as men had eternally created art from the female nude, Steckel’s paintings of both sexes engaged in suggestive acts — and specifically her depictions of erections — set off a commotion in 1973 when they were included in a one-woman show at the Rockland Community College in Suffern, N.Y. As part of the “Fight Censorship Group” (whose members later included Louise Bourgeois and Hannah Wilke), she wrote in their mission statement the same year: “If the erect penis is not wholesome enough to go into museums, it should not be considered wholesome enough to go into women.” A pioneering and inspirational artist Brophy obviously shares affinities with, who also stated, eminently applicable to this exhibition and the works therein, “Good taste is the enemy of art. It’s wonderful for curtains, but in art it’s suffocating.”