

Cherry and Martin

Arnall, January Parkos. "I Love You Robert Heinecken," *January Parkos Arnall Blog*, October 1, 2011 (online).

January Parkos Arnall

Photography, Photo History, and Art Theory in Los Angeles

I love you robert heinecken.

Friday was the first day of the opening weekend for Pacific Standard Time here in Los Angeles. I had the pleasure of being able to tour a private collection in Pasadena that morning then off to the Norton Simon museum and to round out my sojourn east, I swept through a sneak preview of the exhibition "Speaking in Tongues" of works by Robert Heinecken and Wallace Berman at the Armory Center for the Arts. These two artists both worked in the same neighborhood at the same time in Los Angeles and were both working to some degree with photography as a base medium.

The show reminded me of something I talked about in my last blog post about performance art, the need to draw in the viewer before the artist can convey their personal or political message. In this case, Heinecken in particular was able to accomplish this feat by utilizing mass media images and conveyances. I certainly must confess to having a soft spot for participatory art, or art that forces or requests viewers to engage with the art in some way. This kind of work can have profound effect on viewers and society especially when it takes the message outside of traditional institutions and into the streets, living rooms, and hands of lay viewers (those not already interested and open to art viewership). One of Heinecken's most interesting works, and one to which the Armory show devotes substantial space, is his series based on the photograph of a Cambodian soldier holding two decapitated heads. Heinecken plastered this gory image of the smiling soldier over the insides of news and fashion magazines and then placed these in such innocuous places as dentists offices and back on the shelves of magazine stands. This and many other collage works are certainly worth viewing in the exhibition and the collaborative nature of Berman's work is inspiring to artists working today (see my blog post on "free art" to see what I have to say about collaboration).

Heinecken and Berman also are touted in the exhibition as addressing the sexism and violence in media images through their work. They certainly do address these large issues in their many manipulations and collages but I am struck, especially after having just seen the LACE show, at the difference between how men engage with sexism in popular culture and how women dialogue with these topics in their art. It feels like for men it is more about admitting to their own obsessions than reviling them. To this point, two video pieces in the exhibition, one by Heinecken and one by Berman, are unique in their titillation alongside condemnation. The piece of Berman's was shot over ten years and configured post-mortem into the image structure we see presented whereas Heinecken's was installed by the artist during his lifetime and has been re-figured on several occasions in different ways throughout the years. Heinecken's work is presented as in a living room with commercial images flashing on a television through the image of the torso of a nude woman plastered to the surface of the screen. Despite being utilized to point out to the viewer the abundance of sexualized imagery and violence on television and in popular culture, the female body by being shown decapitated and powerless, becomes and enforces male fantasy as well, in many ways belying the attempted criticism.

In the end, despite the issues inherent in their version of addressing sexism, the beauty and complexity of the images is certainly worth viewing. As artists we all have those fellow artists who, when we look at their work, are like visual soul-mates. Looking at Heinecken's work for me has always been like coming home to an aesthetic that is comfortable and complete, something that is just so right and close to my own that I can't view it critically.

More to come on many of the other shows opening this weekend in Los Angeles – whew, how inspiring this all is!

