

February 3-25, 2005

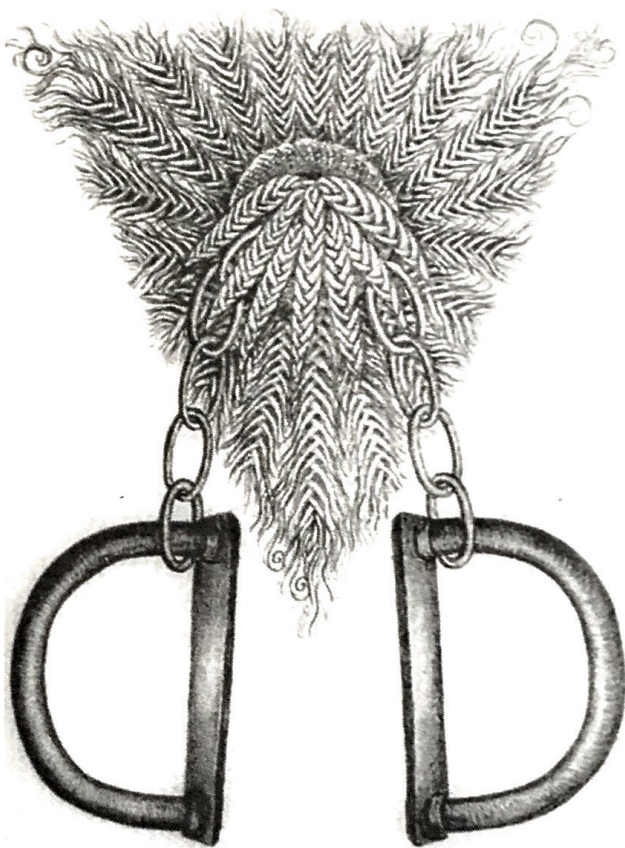
Opening Reception

Thursday February 3 | 6-8 pm

Joscelyn Gardner

Braided Narratives

Joscelyn Gardner, *Plantation Poker: the Merkin Stories* (detail), lithograph, 2004



Gallery Hours

Tuesday to Saturday, noon to 5 pm

Open Studio Gallery

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The work, *Plantation Poker: the Merkin Stories*, plays on the pubic triangle as a symbolic site of female sexual exploitation during slavery and, as with my earlier *Creole Portraits* series, suggests hair decoration as a form of self-empowerment. Drawing on the symbolic function of wigs worn by European men in the eighteenth century to signify social order, this work explores the fashion for “counterfeit hair for a woman’s privy parts” (1776) that became popular around the same time because of the presence of syphilis (the cure for which caused hair loss). Analogous to the beard, the merkin was literally a “pubic wig” that I now reclaim to speak to female Creole identity and a history of bondage.

Joscelyn Gardner

Artist’s Statement, 2004

To Not Look Away

In this age when pornographic images readily pop up on the computer screen of any woman, man or child in possession of an e-mail account, it has become increasingly difficult but also more important to assess the value of images that simultaneously capture our attention and disturb. In this light, it is significant that much important art of the recent past has shown us images that both seduce and trouble us—and which ultimately demand we *not look away*. American artist Kara

Walker, for example, presents beautiful 19th century inspired silhouettes that depict slave women being sexually violated; photographer Cindy Sherman shows the abject female body as both a carnival of wonders and a site of critical speculation; and Canadian artist Rebecca Belmore’s installation based on the stories of “disappeared” women from Vancouver’s East side is a marvel of aesthetic elegance and poignant critique. Unlike unwanted Internet porn, such works offer both visual pleasure and the challenge to consider what visual material is *worth* looking at in our contemporary culture. In the same manner, the suite of lithographs, *Plantation Poker: the Merkin Stories* by Joscelyn Gardner, ultimately serves to remind us *what pornography is not*. It is not images produced in a language that is pictorially rich, albeit challenging; and neither is it images that are historically informed and as exceedingly vital to the current politics of representation as the work of Gardner.

Patrick Mahon is an artist and writer who lives in London, Ontario. His own work involves print media and intersects with post-colonial issues and other discourses. Mahon is currently Chair of Visual Arts at the University of Western Ontario.

It may be of interest and of value to the reader to know that artist Joscelyn Gardner is a white woman who was born in Barbados to a family who has lived on the island for several generations. As a print artist, Gardner has chosen the difficult and important task of claiming the history of slavery, and specifically the stories of women slaves and mistresses, as the subject of her delicate yet stirring print works. Through her depictions of examples of hair decoration juxtaposed

with images of devices of torture, the history of slavery in the Caribbean, and by extension in the United States and Canada, inevitably becomes a story that is hers—and theirs—and *ours*. As viewers, many of us will look upon Gardner's images only to find ourselves implicated in the more than two hundred year history of the enslaving of people from Africa. Meanwhile, Gardner's works beckon our sustained inspection, and thus become available to a wide range of responses. Among the responses, revulsion and awe, and guilt and sorrow must surely be included.

The Merkin Stories (2004), like Gardner's earlier *Creole Portraits* (2002), are finely crafted, hand-drawn lithographs. In this suite the images are accompanied by text excerpts from the diary of 18th century plantation overseer Thomas Thistlewood. Gardner began the development of these detailed prints by first incising a delicate filigree pattern into a slab of limestone before painstakingly building a weave of lines with a litho crayon to construct an image of a carefully arranged Afro-centric hairpiece. Following the work of describing the hair impression, Gardner added a carefully realized drawing of a device of torture such as was regularly used on slaves not so many generations ago. One might wonder why the artist has chosen the medium of lithography for her complex and demanding projects: to some it is a medium which is both so slow and so archaic as to be inappropriate to the urgencies of contemporary art. But it can be argued that by doing her work in such a way Gardner sets forth her awareness of the medium's history as a pictorial vehicle of political criticism and also reminds us of its legacy as a means of reportage. Further, the technical virtuosity that was required to produce the stirring diatribes by earlier lithography artists such as Daumier in the 19th century is mirrored in this context. Gardner, too, is an artist of considerable gifts and, having employed them rigorously alongside her meticulous approach to historical research, she has taken up lithography as a uniquely apt means to produce powerfully engaging and forceful works.

The lithographs of Joscelyn Gardner are stirring: informed, as they are, by an ugly yet compelling history from which we dare not look away. Gardner's images are born within a culture where, some might argue, we have too many images and, moreover, too many troubling and needless images. Yet these works are by no means gratuitous. They are, instead, imaginative records of a shameful past that haunts us still. And, as such, they are exceedingly necessary.

Patrick Mahon

Joscelyn Gardner has an MFA from the University of Western Ontario, London, and a BFA & BA from Queen's University, Kingston. Recent exhibitions include: Galerie Andre Arsenec, Centre Martiniquais d'Action Culturelle, Martinique (2005/solo); Barbardos Museum, Barbardos (2004/solo); Chelsea Galleria, Miami, (2004/solo); McIntosh Gallery, London (2003/solo); White Columns, New York (2000/group).

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