



Conversations seen and unseen

Olivia Bernard, Ellen Grobman, Lynn Peterfreund. Three independent people who have learned to listen to each other's art, who respect each other's freedom and pay attention. They've been meeting together monthly for three years. What happens when, on the basis of a single word prompt, they begin to assemble a resonant selection of their works for an upcoming exhibition? Their bodies are transformed, they seem larger, darker, their hair stands up or out, their expressions searching and pleased as they consider some of the possibilities. **Repression.** 'Isn't all art about repression?' 'All my work is about repression.' If much is repressed, where is beauty? 'If the object isn't beautiful, the whole work is ugly.' One of the three is drawn to high fashion, classic paisley, but the painted fabric designs look worn, beauty becomes frayed and transparent. **Sexuality.** Mention the word sexuality and their faces light up. One is constantly referring to the *Pillow Book of Sei Shonagon*. 'It's hard for me to have many intense relationships at once. I'm a one painting—one person—gal.' 'I'm a 15 painting gal.' How do they discover the relationship between the work and their bodies? Can you really sit on the flower of that chair with its stem protruding between your legs? **Pain.** An image of black crows' bodies tossed across the sky, woe, woe, woe. 'I'm searching for something I don't want to find.' Offenbach's Muse to Hoffman: "Love makes you great, tears make you greater." 'I want the materials to give a feeling for the fragility of life.' One work is the story of heartbreak, but she doesn't want to reveal just what the story is. Another mixes thoughts of death and sexuality in her work and asks, 'don't the French call an orgasm "la petite mort"?"

Idyllic. 'We need quiet groups as well as heavy ones.' 'Is it a landscape, an aerial view, is that the question now? Is there intention?' 'You inspire me to have a lighter touch.' **Place.** Here, now. Isn't a sense of place crucial to creativity? Instead of a homogenous artistic unit these three women have found an appreciation for diversity, leaving and returning. Their utopian desire for community and conversation has ended in a place which is truly democratic. It reminds one of the 1970s new age search for a renaissance society that brought so many creative individuals to the Pioneer Valley. **Abstraction.** And empathy? What happens to abstraction in community? 'We each have an abstract gesture that is conducive to making links between us.' 'I de-couple the motif from its narrow meaning while working on it as a formal element.' 'It's not what but how.'

Identity. Politically alert, they do not want to be labeled, once again, women artists. What does gender have to do with it? As with gay sensibility, a female creative impulse may be difficult to pin down but impossible to deny. The need for a feminist art is not dead, yet—have we answered the question: why are there no great women artists? Whatever we may want to say about their gender, we have to admit for starters that these three women can communicate with each other. And the challenge is to move beyond an in-house conversation. **Ambiguity.** Some artists make statements, others ask questions. Why should art works be easily untangled? 'I'm ready to not know what I'm doing. How do you not recognize something?' 'It's such an acute experience of materials that I don't care what it means.' 'I want an object that is what it is, but also suggestive, moving in space.' David Salle: "In this age of the mash-up, we put things next to other things and just hope some sort of meaning will emerge." Such is the height of modern self-indulgent individualism. These three women are more bent on discovering common feelings, a sense of direction beneath an ever-changing surface. They recognize when something is 'too collage-y, too cutout.' 'We're all longing, animating the air.'