

Sali Taylor
 Gallery nine5

By Joel Simpson

A Venus of Willendorf in high-heel shoes, lipstick and a bra; warrior goddess Athena, dressed “to kill,” with outsided lips, eyes, seven handbags, and carrying a bracelet the size of a hoop on her arm; contemporary supermodels hobnobbing with austere, faceless stone figures their size from Cycladic Greek statuary — Sali Taylor’s work irreverently combines the sacred statuary from the ancient and prehistoric world with the goddesses and treasures of Fifth Avenue. Both reservoirs of images are rich in cultural referents, so bridging the 4000–5000+ year gap produces a virtually inexhaustible wealth of provocative juxtapositions. In *Jiggle*, for example, four nubile pom-pom girls, their hair waving, their breasts just barely contained in their scant bikinis, surround a Cycladic figure, endowed by Taylor with a flip hairdo, a matching blue bikini and crowned with a cardboard-looking tiara. Of course, she has no face, and her skin surface is of striated stone; still they remind us that their antique companion was what once passed for a sex queen herself.

In *Flat*, Venus de Milo herself (she was Hellenistic, at least 1800 years later than the Cycladic statues) holds the wheel of a background SUV festooned with models in bikinis. Her torso and arms are of flesh, and she’s wearing a yellow bikini. On the right a female silhouette made of letters spelling various adornment devices seems to hold up the body of a leaning model wearing boots, whose head is the impersonal one of a Cycladic statue. Nothing is flat in this image except the presumed tire. The radical composites of the bodies generate large-amplitude oscillations in the lust-saturated gaze. Our attraction to Venus’s ripe human breasts is chastened by her classic stone face, and the process repeats with the leaning model, so that by the time we arrive at the background models accessorizing the SUV our naive arousal is spent.

Taylor continues in this vein, generating a delightfully ironic body of work that effectively comments on the viewer’s susceptibility to mar-

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Sali Taylor *Cycladic Reunion*, 2008. Encaustic & collage on hollowcore birch panel. 96 x 24 x 2 inches.
 Courtesy: Gallery nine5, New York

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keting with sexiness. She puts Cycladic bodies on Madonna in three fashionista poses that ooze charm, but thanks to Taylor’s archaeological touch, brim with newfound humor. In a series of nine collages collectively entitled *Cycladic Makeover*, she presents scenes from an imaginary mime-dance of her Cycladic darlings. The faceless ones climb on top of one another, do splits, hang upside down, cavort around poles, pose with designer handbags while standing on one of their number asleep, etc. It’s reminiscent of the oblique humor of Walt Disney’s 1929 *Silly Symphony*, “Skeleton Dance,” but more sophisticated.

Taylor’s tour de force is her 25 x 96 inch group portrait entitled *Cycladic Reunion*, a collage of figures pasted on a two-inch thick piece of wood, in the conglomerate style of the Beatles’ Sergeant Pepper album cover, but on the scale of a big group picture from a wedding. It’s also a celebration of an inclusive diversity that does not discriminate against anyone who is made of or partially made of stone — or flesh. The “family” comprises stone figures, stone bodies with human heads, human bodies with stone heads, and human bodies. All the human components are radically different, all the stone components are from identical or nearly identical statues, so it’s obvious it’s a single family — with a number of in-laws, and it’s hilarious.

One can enjoy it on one level as sly commentary on usually sacrosanct archaeological artifacts, a kind of semiological rave that overflows with humor. The contextual histories of Taylor’s elements, however, as she wormholes her way through the last, say 12,000 years, carry a great deal of invisible weight. Combined they generate trenchant commentary on our own feminine culture of beauty and adornment.

For they are really more about us than about the cultures that produced the statues Taylor accessorizes. But one must start with those cultures. People of prehistoric cultures depended on the vagaries of the hunt for their sustenance, and so they lived in a world filled with uncertainty and mystery. As a result, people considered women’s bodies as the locus of magic, mystery and power. Fecundity, lactation, and menstruation were great mysteries, on a par with Death itself, and every woman embodied them, so they left us statuettes with exaggerated breasts, venters and buttocks, amulets of power without faces.

Are these bodies any less magical today, despite the revelations of gynecological science, Taylor’s work seems to ask? Is there a human nature whose magic, mystery and power we neglect, while we cover it over with glamour, presumably to enhance an otherwise undervalued individual in an overpopulated world?

Before this turns into a secular sermon, we must acknowledge the vast changes since that time, not only in the regularized food supply but in the exponentially increased population as well. Instead of a birth being a major social event, today it is considered something very private, and the process of finding prospective partners is more complex. The excesses Taylor depicts in a piece like *Warrior Athena* bespeak an obvious spiritual impoverishment in comparison to the ancient original, but she goes farther. Some of the hand bags depicted are made of animal skins — snake and crocodile — the contemporary equivalent of the bear tooth necklace? Not quite. Bears were killed for food, and the teeth were leftover trophies. The snakes and crocodiles are killed to appease a desire for self-beautification, with an attractive hint of danger. Of course, good art is always a little dangerous. **M**



Sali Taylor *Flat*, 2008. Collage. 12 x 12 inches.
Courtesy: Gallery nine5, New York