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WASHINGTON ARTS MUSEUM PRESENTS

MANON CLEARY

A RETROSPECTIVE

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THE EDISON PLACE GALLERY
701 9TH STREET NW
ENTRANCE ON 8TH STREET NW AT G
WASHINGTON, DC 20068

CURATED BY JEAN LAWLOR COHEN

MANON CLEARY: A RETROSPECTIVE

JEAN LAWLOR COHEN

This exhibition covers almost four decades of Manon Cleary's work, a dramatic range from lush flowers and classic nudes to sensational subjects that others don't draw or paint or, at least, don't attempt with such virtuosity and obsession. Straightforward likenesses hang beside more eccentric works—paintings of women holding bones, drawings of nude men in transparent bags, faces with mouths gasping for air, a husband sealed in rubber and, of course, portraits of glowing rats.

Most of these subjects seem to reflect ambivalence—the co-existent states of love and lust, pleasure and pain, freedom and constraint. A man contorted by a plastic bag seems at once prisoner and willing model. A man in a rubber body suit is both trapped and titillated. Almost all of the human figures radiate a non-threatening calm, even as they inhabit spaces of disturbing scale.

No doubt this duality brings Cleary into the camp of “magic realism.” In her *Mysteries* tableaux [pages 14 and 15], each fleshy human figure, animal bone and Pompeian mural appears as it would to any keen observer. Yet juxtaposed, the elements have the look of dreams or, as Cleary puts it, dreams “minus Freud.” Even in these mythic scenes, the artist has scuttled theme and interpretation for direct experience.

Long after Cleary visited Pompeii's Villa of the Mysteries, she painted herself there nude against frescoes, the walls not as she found them but bright and unravaged by time. She included props—bones collected in Wyoming fields, one a cow's spine that she holds aloft in eucharistic pose. This mix of self, emblems of death and an ancient sex cult comes as close as Cleary ever does to an in-the-moment narrative. More often she and the personages in her works exist in anticipation of an event or in its aftermath. They seem caught in a candid, unintrusive photo. And no subtext emerges beyond the challenge and comfort of *vita brevis, ars longa*, “life is short, art endures.”

Certainly the label “magic realism” honors her sleight-of-hand, her making art out of something (a photo) that is itself an illusion. But for all the magician-like control, Cleary claims to work intuitively. With no polemic or plan, she explores topics that evolve over time. She considers this process “mystically-driven,” led by “an inner voice” or, in some cases, “guides and guardians,” wisdom gleaned from horoscopes and even sessions with a psychic.

Each of her subjects falls into an inevitable progression that tracks from the hyper-color works of the late 1960s [pages 24 and 25] to the silvery graphites of 2006. The earliest works here, a hothouse of images, date from her New York teaching days and study abroad. Their Pop Art-inflected portraits, as dated as go-go boots, have the look of those hallucinogenic times.

Yet after moving to Washington in her late twenties, Cleary pares her art down. The sensory overload gives way to a subdued palette; the environmental details recede into empty grounds. Paintings of cloud-streaked skies shrink into tiny picture frames. Subjects withdraw indoors to pause beneath theatrical light—a rat on a canted table, a man hunched against darkness. More recently, luminous bodies disappear into light-reflecting plastic and then beneath opaque wrap.

This paring down informs Cleary's technique as well. She starts a painting not with a white canvas and gradual application of color but with an edge-to-edge coating of rich Mars red, burnt umber or burnt sienna. Passages of light (say, a cadmium red-white mix for skin) and dark (brown pigment for shadows) emerge in scumbled layers. She begins a drawing by pressing various graphites to paper or board, then uses four kinds of erasers to “draw out” the illuminated elements. By focusing only on what light reveals, seeing positives rise out of negatives, Cleary may be buffering her subjects (and herself) against undesirable, ambient stimuli. Just as a subject remains inviolate within its own shallow-perspec-

tive calm, Cleary maintains a self-protective stance against the world. And she has examined the reasons.

“Because I’m an identical twin,” she says, “I’ve concentrated on work that uses the physical me to see myself separate from her.” Indeed the fact of being one of two seems to haunt the work over time—from drawings based on photos of the sisters in show-biz poses and a double portrait in which Manon’s open mouth reveals a screaming twin Shirley to a few of the *Mysteries* in which female pairs engage in violent or unexplained rituals.

To define herself as a “single one,” Cleary aimed to distance her life and work from her artist-sister’s. Yet venturing out brought some disillusionment. Time spent on foreign ground resulted in an ill-fated marriage and a sexual assault. During a long tenure as college professor, she suffered lung damage she attributes to exposure to toxic materials, leaving her dependent upon an oxygen tank to breathe. Thus the work and personal circumstances converge now, making for a simplified, circumscribed life and a degree of isolation.

Fortunately the process of getting to the essence of things finds its expression in her most intriguing subject—the nude self-portrait. What could be more trend-free and art-historical, more liberated from personal taste and calendar than the naked body? What other model allows for such independence, reflection and accessibility? In an early painting *Graduation Day* [page 21], a nude Cleary stares down the viewer, teasing the old dynamic of female/model realized by male/artist gaze. Yet the painting also defies a burdensome familial influence. (She turns her back to her mother’s portrait hanging irrelevantly beyond.) Cleary flips art history in later works as well by claiming the male nude as a sensual object of wonder and occasional target of humor.

When Manon and her sister were children, they discovered a book in their physician father’s library, *Twins and Other*

Freaks. The notion of their strangeness jarred the girls, who began to think of everything else as “other.” Once separate in young adulthood, the two pursued difference for its own sake. Ultimately Manon supplants her twin. In the strangest of the *Mysteries* paintings, for example, Cleary clones herself and appears as both of the two naked women [page 15]. She summons twinhood yet replaces a sister with her own decidedly beautiful form.

Viewers sometime approach Cleary’s nude self-portraits with a little discomfort. She’s not an anonymous model, after all, or the long-ago mistress of a Venetian painter, but a contemporary Washington woman, a career professor. They wonder, are we intruding on an intimate scene? Is the artist fixated on herself to the point of solipsism? Are not even the close-up *Exotic Blooms* intentionally anatomical? But for Cleary, “All art is narcissistic,” and she admits that nakedness hasn’t worried her since she “conquered my Mid-western modesty.”

No matter how she appears in her works, Cleary demonstrates an ability to be, as the existentialists call it, “a voyeur of the self.” On the simplest level, this reflects her method—setting up a camera with shutter delay and variable exposures, assuming a posture and allowing that photo to structure a drawing. On another level, this objectivity leads to a reckoning with universal form—the human body as a mannerist, *contrapposto* letter S (a Caravaggio trick) or as an homage to the *sfumato* technique by which smoky light defines curves.

Perhaps Cleary’s most shocking and memorable subjects are the rats. They’ve fascinated her since she saw photos of an NIH experiment and then received a white one as a gift. “A rat,” she says, “is a beautiful object, reflecting light.” At times in her work, rats occupy spaces with human beings, but more often a rat appears alone, alert and poised

in sinuous posture, eyes sparkling like star rubies, as pleasing to the eye as any human model.

Cleary's most disturbing rat portraits are based on images of non-pets, the animals that medical labs equip with antenna-like "drug ports" on their foreheads [page 9]. It takes no great leap of the imagination to see that the artist identifies with this clever creature, perhaps even more so now that she's connected to a breathing apparatus.

Though she hesitates to attribute her mystical drive to religious faith, she often envelops subjects in a sacramental glow. In the so-called *Unicorn* rat series, the victims themselves receive a blessing of light, what Rembrandt saw as "visitation." They shine with the same glory that, in Renaissance paintings, surrounds the Christ-like figures destined to die for others.

In Cleary's tour-de-force drawings *Men in Plastic Bags* [page 23], she insists that light is more "a vehicle of abstraction." Here light catches on the surfaces of synthetic material and human skin to create a Rorschach of sorts. Is this life to come (amniotic sacs)? Violent death (body bags coming home from war)? Cleary herself attributes the image to the notion of auto-erotic asphyxiation and to the eerie TV idyll *Twin Peaks*, in which a wrapped corpse washes ashore.

Nude self portraits also yield multiple readings—*Sleeping Beauty*, the odalisque, film noir vixen, spent lover, even victim of crime. In some instances, she folds in upon herself, taking poses that, no doubt unconsciously, suit a guilt-ridden Eve. Two series—*Rape* and *Breathless*—arise from personal events and anxieties. They link her to the anguish of Michelangelo's *Last Judgment*, the ecstasies of martyred saints, the screams of Munch and Goya. The terror-stricken faces of *Breathless* catalog the horror of her own weakened lungs, mouths gasping beneath a scrim of soot. This exhaustive iteration of her own self secures Cleary's place among contemporary realists.

Much of the work reveals an impulse to step outside the medium, to remind the viewer and herself that art is illusion. In the *Movement* series, Cleary's photo-based images appear

at once realistically drawn and blurred, due to the body's shifts and the camera's slowed speed in semi-dark [page 18]. In one of the *Mysteries*, a fresco figure breaks its 2-D bonds and enters the world of a living observer. At times, Cleary too seems in transit between two realities—the sacred and the profane, the classical ideal, where Beauty is Truth, and the real, where gravity and mortality rule.

Now with passing time and illness, she finds herself retrieving earlier photo shoots in order to avoid "the irremediable loss of my physical self." Cleary insists that her finished work stops short of idealization, yet consider the human bodies without cellulite or scars, rats without dirty claws (or plague), flowers without blemish—all seem held at some point of perfection. Like scenes from Keats's *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, they remain suspended in youth and beauty.

Yet being trapped in art (on the high-relief vase, the oil canvas) also represents a kind of death, and Cleary's subjects are indeed *nature morte*. By seeing all objects as still life—things to be arranged and illuminated at her will, she defies physical decay and death the only way a flesh-and-blood person can—through the splendid artifice of her art.

Jean Lawlor Cohen

Fair youth, beneath the trees, thou canst not leave
Thy song, nor ever can those trees be bare;
Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kiss,
Though winning near the goal—yet, do not grieve;
She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,
For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!

Thou, silent form! dost tease us out of thought
As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!

When old age shall this generation waste,
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,
"Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know."

from *Ode on a Grecian Urn* By John Keats (1795–1821)



RAMON AFTER LUNCH
30"x70", 1979, oil on canvas, Private Collection





ALOYSIUS BESIDE A VICTORIAN CHAIR
40"x70", 1976-77, oil, Collection of Peter and Bernis von zur Muehlen





RAT IN HAND
50"x50", 1976, oil, Collection of Andrew and Ellie Salazar



PORTRAIT OF MARK
42"x48", 1981, oil, Collection of Mark Sandground



MYSTERY SERIES #3
60"x48", 1983-89, oil, Collection of the artist





EXOTIC BLOOM SERIES NO. 11
18"x24", 1999, oil, Collection of the artist





MOVEMENT SERIES NO. 8
25"x31", 1994, graphite on paper, Collection of the artist



STEVE'S MANON
25"x31", 1988, graphite on paper, Collection of Steven Kijek



SELF-PORTRAIT WITH RANDY NO. 2
30"x40", 1977, graphite on paper, Collection of Dr. Morgan Delaney



GRADUATION DAY: SELF-PORTRAIT WITH MOTHER
61"x49", 1984, oil, Collection of John and Dede Brough



MAN IN RUBBER MASK NO. 1
32"x26", 2005, graphite on paper, Collection of the artist



MAN IN PLASTIC BAG NO. 9
32"x26", 1995, graphite on paper, Collection of the artist



IRON

69"x49", 1971-72, acrylic, Collection of the artist







MANON CLEARY, BORN IN ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI IN 1942, RECEIVED HER BFA IN 1964 FROM WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY, ST. LOUIS, AND HER MFA IN 1968 FROM TYLER SCHOOL OF ART, TEMPLE UNIVERSITY, PENNSYLVANIA, AND ROME, ITALY. IN 1970 SHE JOINED THE UNIVERSITY OF THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA FACULTY AS ART PROFESSOR AND LATER SERVED AS CHAIRMAN OF THE ART DEPARTMENT.

ARTIST-IN-RESIDENCY STAYS INCLUDE HERNING, DENMARK (THE HERNING HOJSKOLE), WYOMING (THE UCROSS FOUNDATION) AND AMATY, KAZAKHSTAN. IN 1998, SHE RECEIVED THE 14TH ANNUAL MAYOR'S ART AWARD FROM THE WASHINGTON, D.C. COMMISSION ON THE ARTS AND HUMANITIES.

ARTICLES ABOUT HER WORK HAVE APPEARED IN, AMONG OTHERS, ART IN AMERICA, AMERICAN ARTIST, ARCHITECTURAL ISSUES AND THE SCIENCES, JOURNAL OF THE NEW YORK ACADEMY OF SCIENCES, PLUS TEXTBOOKS AND CRITICAL STUDIES. CLEARY, REPRESENTED BY ADDISON/RIPLEY FINE ART, LIVES WITH HER HUSBAND F. STEVEN KIJEK IN WASHINGTON, D.C.

SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS

The Gulbenkian Foundation: Centro de Arte Moderna, Lisbon, Portugal, 1985, a ten-year retrospective; Iolas / Jackson Gallery, New York; FIAC, Grand Palais, Paris; Abraham Lubeiski Gallery, New York; Tyler Gallery, State University College, Oswego, New York; J. Rosenthal Gallery, Chicago; Waddle Gallery, NOVA, Sterling, Virginia; Osuna Gallery, Addison/Ripley Gallery and Corcoran Gallery of Art, ArtSites96, Washington, DC.

SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS

Nora Haime Gallery, New York; Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, USSR; Kasteyev State Art Museum, Almaty, Kazakhstan; National Academy of Design, New York; Alternative Museum, New York; WPA, Washington, DC; American Embassy, Valeta, Malta; Picker Gallery, Colgate University, Hamilton, New York; The Butler Institute of American Arts, Youngstown, Ohio; Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Philadelphia; The Fort Worth Museum, Fort Worth; Museum of Contemporary Art, La Jolla; Fine Arts Gallery of San Diego, San Diego; Århus Kunst Museum, Århus, Denmark.

SELECTED PUBLIC AND CORPORATE COLLECTIONS

Stevens Corporation, Little Rock; Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, New York; Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC; Hickory Museum, Hickory, NC; Elvehjem Museum of Art, University of Wisconsin, Madison; American Embassy, Lima, Peru; Chicago Art Institute, Chicago; National Museum of Women in the Arts, Washington, DC; Mint Museum, Charlotte, North Carolina; Kasteev Art State Museum, Almaty, Kazakhstan; Bayley Museum of the University of Virginia, Charlottesville; Phoenix Art Museum, Phoenix; Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester, Rochester; Ponce Museum, Puerto Rico; Southwestern Bell Corporation, Texas.

ME AND MY SHADOW

59.5"x32.5", 1974, graphite and watercolor pencils, Collection of Bayley Museum, University of Virginia (not in current show)

P A T R O N S

Lenders to the Exhibition

Ron & Anne Abramson
Carolyn Alper
Lisa Brotman
John & Dede Brough
Sabrina Cassagnol
Leigh Conner
Dr. Morgan Delaney
Anne Geracimos
Hank and Carol Goldberg
Chris Hamlin-Beight
F. Steven Kijek
Steven and Linda Krensky
Rush Lennon
Mark & Cheryl Miller
Annette Polan
Private Collection
Andrew & Ellie Salazar
Mr. and Mrs. Mark Sandground
Milton & Karen Schneidermann
Jim and Mary Speyer
Peter & Bernis von zur Muehlen
Brandon Webster

Patrons of the exhibition

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