

Nudes on vintage fabrics provide witty contrast

BY MARGARET HAWKINS
Galleries

To paraphrase an old song, Orly Cogan enjoys being a girl, and her embroidered nudes offer a flip, hip irreverent take on the conventions of femininity. She achieves her signature look by stitching figures on dainty vintage fabrics. These found linens, which once served as table runners, bureau scarves and tablecloths in a more modest age, were already embroidered once by an earlier and more circumscribed generation of women. Cogan adds to these quaint decorations a layer of attitude that updates old-fashioned womanly crafts with a kind of happy-go-lucky, postmodern perversity.

Thus we see prim rows of flowers and leaves forming a bower for the "bachelor girl" in a series of soft-porn stitcheries that appears to be a kind of self-portrait of the artist with snack food. She is shown not just eating but smashing soft pastries into her mouth or against her body while staring provocatively at us and wearing nothing but panties and striped ankle socks.

The portrait Cogan offers of life as a "bachelor girl" looks like loads of fun. There's nothing in here about paying the rent or even getting dressed. The world she shows us is one of pleasure and self-absorption with occasional drop in visits from like-minded nude males. When she's not eating or playing suggestive games with hand puppets, Cogan's bachelor girl lounges around talking on her cell phone and hugging her cat. And she stays voluptuous and pretty, no matter how many Hostess cupcakes and Pop Tarts she eats. What a life. The character Cogan creates is sort of a 21st-century female Hugh Hefner in much scantier pajamas. The trick here is that she's Playboy centerfold and playgirl all at once. She gets to keep her cake and eat it too.

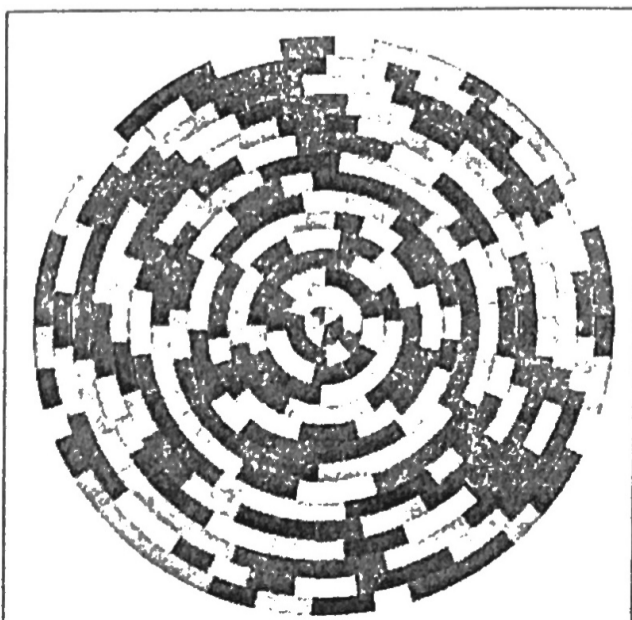
All this would just be propaganda for a point of view no one seriously disagrees with anymore except that Cogan's rendering is so appealing and so deftly integrated with the vintage fabrics she uses that the effect ends up being more than just the sum of its parts. The works are both decorative and witty. The embroideries are fairly primitive, made of neat basting stitches that clearly draw her subjects but without any of the subtlety of the originals that earlier generations of women sweated over with cramped fingers. It is this combination of old and new, painstaking craft with a modern sensibility that makes it work. And although the carefree hedonism Cogan offers up is lovely to look at, part of her point is that it wouldn't exist without the untold hours of labor the bachelor girl's great grandmother invested to make it possible



In "Poptart Girl," Orly Cogan embroiders a semi-nude woman eating a pastry onto vintage linen.

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Sol LeWitt continues his exploration of the optical effects of color and pattern on the human eye in his new show of wall drawings at Rhona Hoffman. Two distinctly different bodies of work are represented and they are like night and day, literally, in the sense that one set is bright and the other so dark it requires an adjustment of the eye and an opening of the pupil before they can be viewed.

Such attention to the physical mechanics of sight might seem a little obsessive but when viewing a LeWitt show, that's what it's all about, how color and shape and scale physically and psychologi-



'BACHELOR GIRL,' ORLY COGAN

◆ Julia Friedman Gallery
◆ Peoria Street
◆ (312) 455-0755
◆ Through Jan. 24

SOL LEWITT

◆ Rhona Hoffman Gallery
◆ 118 N. Peoria
◆ (312) 455-1990
◆ Through Jan. 24

cally affect the viewer.

His two big wall drawings are a visually noisy assault on the eye. The showstopper is "Circle with Broken Bands of Color" in which LeWitt has painted a circle on the wall in six flat primary and secondary colors. These short bands of bright opaque color form a concentric pattern that appears to bow off the wall and open up at the center like some fun house tunnel. It is pure optical illusion and pure fun. Sometimes LeWitt's arrangements of marks, shapes and colors can fill whole museums, as his show at the Museum of Contemporary Art a couple of years ago did, leading us to higher planes of contemplation. But this piece is sheer giddy sensation — look, ma, the wall is bulging! — and worth seeing for that alone.

The smaller drawings in the entrance gallery are opposite to the big wall piece in every way. Horizontal in orientation, they are also composed of bands of color, but these are muddy neutrals the viewer has to look closely at to see properly. The wavy bands of grayed-out maroons and dirty blue and brown look like seascapes painted in a fog.

The strange thing about them is that, unlike any other LeWitt work I've seen, they are framed. This may just be a practical consideration since as works on paper they need more protection against the curious or larcenous gallery visitor. Whatever the reason, the frames give them a stodgy last-century feel that at first seems out of sync with what we expect from LeWitt but that is not necessarily disharmonious with the inevitable seascape allusion they make.

I saw these the same day I saw the Manet seascape paintings and the seascape photo show, both now on exhibit at the Art Institute of Chicago, and together they seem to be a continuum. This portion of LeWitt's show makes a satisfying abstract companion piece to both of those, meditations as they all are on the hypnotic effect of the horizontal and its reference to the infinity of space.

Margaret Hawkins is a local free-lance writer.

Sol Lewitt's "Circle With Broken Bands of Color," which appears to open at the center like a fun house tunnel, is on exhibit at the Rhona Hoffman Gallery.