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The Pleasure Principle

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THE PLEASURE PRINCIPLE

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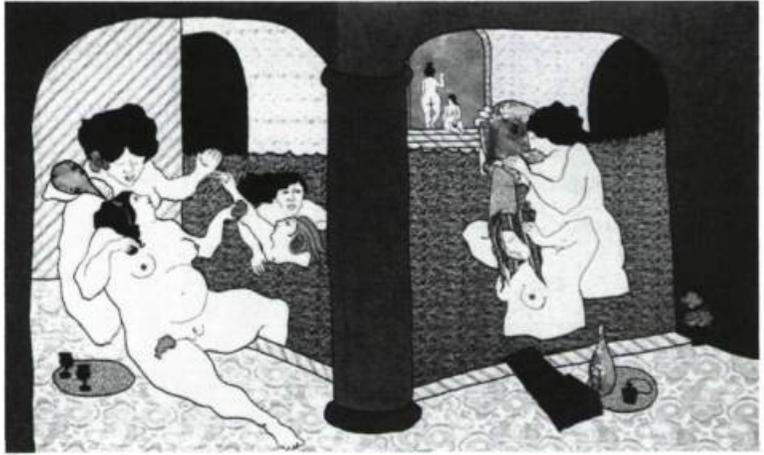
Jeannie Kamins' recent show at Article, *Sweet Dreams*, seemed to project a world entirely eroticized. In the work of this Montreal-based artist, generously upholstered human bodies, mainly female, blithely gambol and intersect. The outlines circumscribing nearly all these figures quiver and meander as if plugged into an energy source of their own.

In some ways Kamins' stylized – at times almost camp – imagery contains trace elements of Matisse and Beardsley. This is especially true of the black and white drawings and the sumptuous fabric collages, like the vast (6' x 10') *Bathers and Bacchanalia*. In these works, flatness and pattern are paramount. The playful compositions express a kind of pleasure principle.

However, in Kamins' art the pleasure often contains a note of humor. There is something R. Crumbish about the way Kamins' nudes transcend mere obesity and threaten to lose their human shapes altogether and become trembling amebic glaciers of pink protoplasm. In a sense, these figures spoof the modern cult of body firmness. Kamins' figures bulge and sag with a winning exuberance.

Kamins plays fatness against flatness. The doodly, cartoonish outlines speak of great weight, but the solid colors and the collage elements – cut-out swaths of fabric – bring everything back to the picture surface.

This intentional contrasting of virtual and actual reality sets up certain visual and emotional tensions and initiates an intriguing transfer of eroticism away from the overly sexual figurative elements and into the picture surface as a whole. We move along an ornate visual path from the recognizable particulars toward more abstract elements. And along the way, we come across sexually charged nodes – a nipple or a vaginal



Jeannie Kamins, *The Bathers*, 1990. Fabric appliqué ; 2 m x 3,3 m. Artist's collection.

cavity or a strange poppy-like flower. In Kamins' secret gardens of delight there are few anatomical secrets.

Often our wavy linear path swerves from the outside of one pink body to the inside of another. For example, the outline of a shoulder of one big female in *Bathers* is at the same time a line inside the body of a second woman directly behind the first. As a result, the two women seem to merge in monumental sexual act that doesn't depend on specific, isolated body parts.

Ultimately the traditional role of the outline as divider and frontier is intentionally subverted. Inside becomes outside. If human identity has something to do with skin as container, then Kamins' strangely merged figures are on the verge of losing their identities, not only to each other but also to their exotic settings.

What Kamins seems to strive for in her art is an expression of that hallucinatory moment – described variously by Thoreau and Jung – when we experience complete union with our surroundings. But Kamins' expression of this experience is interestingly devoid of the solemnity usually accompanying visionary moments. A picture such as *Bathers*, which at first appears to be figurative, ends up as a kind of abstraction, a delightful libinal tapestry.

HENRY LEHMANN