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The External Feminine: Chantal Joffe at Cheim & Read

by Phoebe Hoban

May 4 to June 22, 2012

547 West 25th Street, between 10th and 11th avenues

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The women in Chantal Joffe's paintings are not exactly fashion victims. Yet, compellingly, they contain elements of both fashion and victimhood. One instantly recognizes their *au courant* or vintage garb as much as the strained, pained and/or bored look on their flat faces, an expression not really of torment so much as perpetual ennui. And yet the canvases come across as meditations on contemporary life more than critiques of individual personalities. The flapper-like girl with the bob, or that blonde with the lacy Peter-Pan collar, translate as tarot cards of feminine mystique rather than portraits of real people.



Chantal Joffe, *Blonde in a Lace Coat*, 2012. Oil on board, 72-1/8 x 47-7/8 inches. Courtesy of Cheim & Read

Joffe blatantly references the more psychological—and painterly work of —Alice Neel (on view at David Zwirner through June 23) and strongly relates both to the stylized, affectless portraits of Elizabeth Peyton and the faux pornographic work of John Currin. But Joffe uses the canvas as a room of her own to explore contemporary femalehood—not so much the eternal feminine as the external feminine, writ large.

The in-your-face impact of her paintings comes as much from scale as technique. These are big blowups of women, exaggerated and poster-like. There is no visible brushwork or impasto—instead there are obvious drips. It is in these drips, casual yet deliberate, random but not really, that Joffe's latent expressionism lurks.

Oddly, one of Joffe's strengths is her sense of purposeful restraint. She is to painting what Raymond Carver is to short stories: an expert minimalist. While employing more detail in her approach to portraiture than Alex Katz, whose legacy she also clearly inherits, she refrains from full-blown realism, implying rather than mirroring reality. And yet she captures

something ineffable—a certain mystery that every woman exudes. Who is that blonde clutching her baby as if it is an unwilling fashion accessory, the fingers of its little hand splayed, Neel-like, as if to quote its mother? Or the placid, almost-beautiful woman with the dazzling green eyes and striped shirt, strangely missing any

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The two most realized paintings in the show, both done in 2012, are, ultimately, the most interesting: *Woman in a Red Flowered Dress*, whose commanding presence and disapproving mouth cannot be ignored, and *Self-portrait Sitting on a Striped Chaise Lounge*, a nakedly honest portrait of Joffe herself, seated on stripes—a direct reference to Neel’s influence in its nudity, composition, and evocative expression that pointedly evokes Neel’s own famous nude self-portrait (on a striped chair) made when she was 80. While the other six paintings suggest an interesting narrative, these two canvases *are* the interesting narrative.

We live in a Facebook world—that seems to be the subtext of Joffe’s work. And yet even Facebook profiles hint at something deeper than the merely superficial. Joffe’s reductive approach reaches its apex, perhaps, in “Blonde in a Lace Coat,” a pale painting that is nearly pure ephemera, portraying not so much a woman as a wisp. While her minimalism has its uses, in the end it is content, rather than form, that satisfies. Joffe should take an unfashionable risk and imbue her gallery of femme fatalities—everyday vampires of a sort—with more real flesh and blood.

Phoebe Hoban is author of *Alice Neel: The Art of Not Sitting Pretty* (St. Martin’s Press, 2010) and *Basquiat: A Quick Killing in Art* (Viking/Penguin, 1998.)



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