

THE GREAT GOD PAN IS DEAD

Saturday, May 10, 2014

Good Girls Bad Girls Damn Girls

[Robert Boyd](#)



Karin Broker, *Good Girls Bad Girls*, 2013, conte on formica with leather bound book, 84 x 60 inches

When you walk into [Karin Broker's](#) new exhibit, *damn girls*, you see a room full of flowers. These are very large drawings done on formica. She taught Rice students (like me) back in the early 80s to cover masonite with gesso that had been repeatedly sanded until it was perfectly smooth. It forms a beautifully hard surface for the Conte. In this case, she drew directly on the formica, which must form an equally hard surface.

Broker has done a lot of pictures of flowers over the years. They tend to be like this--oversized and dramatic. Still, pictures of flowers, no matter how beautifully done, fall into the realm of "pretty things." They fundamentally appear as bourgeois decoration. The old academies ranked them well below important subjects like religious paintings and history paintings. And because they've been a favorite subject for Broker for so long, it feels comfortable and familiar for a viewer to walk into a room full of her flower drawings.

Talk about a bait and switch. The subject of this show is not pretty flowers. It's women in their glory and their long mistreatment by men. These are, in fact, history paintings--painful histories. Behind Broker's exquisite craftsmanship and beautiful drawing, this show seethes with anger.

A drawing like *fighting pretty* appears from the distance a picture of flowers against a mottled, streak off-white ground. It's only when you get close and (if you're like me) don your reading glasses that you see that it is covered with text.



Karin Broker, *Picture Pretty*, 2014, conte on formica with leather bound book, 84 x 60 inches

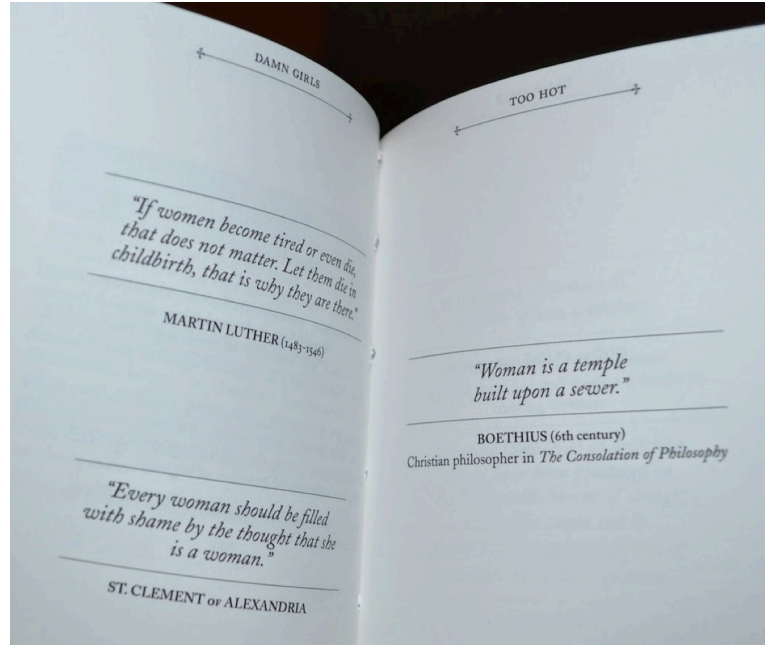


Karin Broker, *fighting pretty*, 2013, conte on formica with leather bound book, 84 x 60 inches

In this case, it's a list of women soldiers and warriors throughout history. This is one of the themes in the show, and one of the chapters in the book Broker compiled and printed for the show, also titled *damn girls*. In addition, she has chapters on inspirational women ("good girls bad girls"); imprisoned women, particularly those in Magdalene Asylums and girls imprisoned by psychopaths ("nice & quiet"); women who were killed for being "witches" ("too hot"); women who cross social/legal boundaries created by sexism ("belle story"); and objectification of women ("nosegay"). The book is full of uncomfortable facts and figures, disturbing anecdotes, hateful aphorisms--as well as inspirational material. It's a handbook or almanac, meant to be browsed rather than read straight through. (Given that 20 copies were produced, one could say that it is not meant to be read at all. But perhaps the text will be made more widely available--as an e-book, for example.)

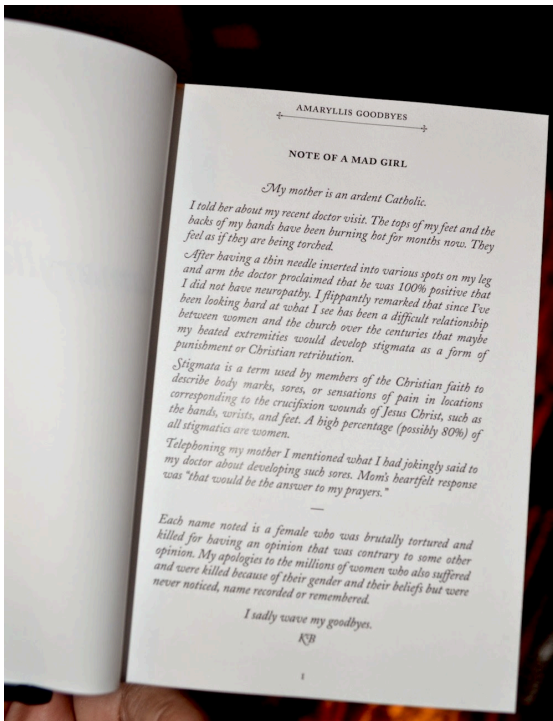


Karin Broker, *fighting pretty*, 2013, conte on formica with leather bound book, 84 x 60 inches

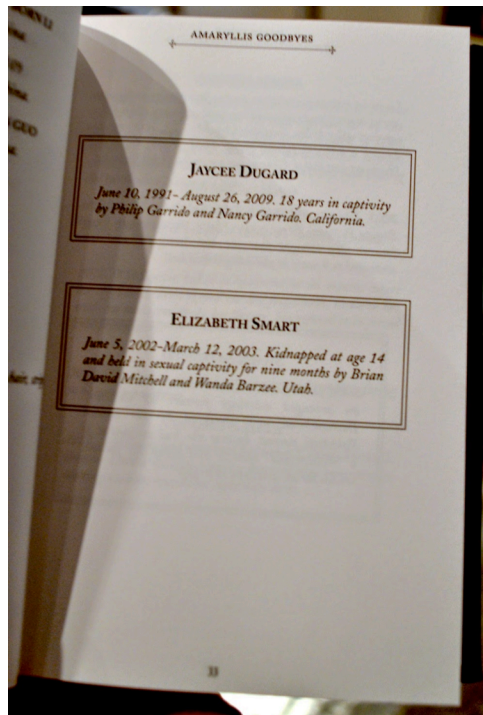


Karin Broker, *damn girls*

Some *lovely* thoughts by a few of the intellectual authors of Western civilization are included in the book. They make you sick and embarrassed to read them.



Karin Broker, *damn girls*



Karin Broker, *damn girls*

Each chapter has a brief introduction by Broker. A chapter on women burned as witches and heretics opens with a personal story:

My mother is an ardent Catholic.

I told her about my recent doctor visit. The tops of my feet and the backs of my hands have been burning hot for months now. They feel as if they are being torched.

After having a thin needle inserted into various spots on my leg and arm the doctor proclaimed that he was 100% positive that I did not have neuropathy. I flippantly remarked that since I've been looking hard at what I see has been a difficult relationship between women and the church over the centuries that maybe my heated extremities would develop stigmata as a form of punishment or Christian retribution.

Stigmata is a term used by members of the Christian faith to describe body marks, sores, or sensations of pain in locations corresponding to the crucifixion wounds of Jesus Christ, such as the hands, wrists, and feet. A high percentage (possibly 80%) of all stigmatics are women.

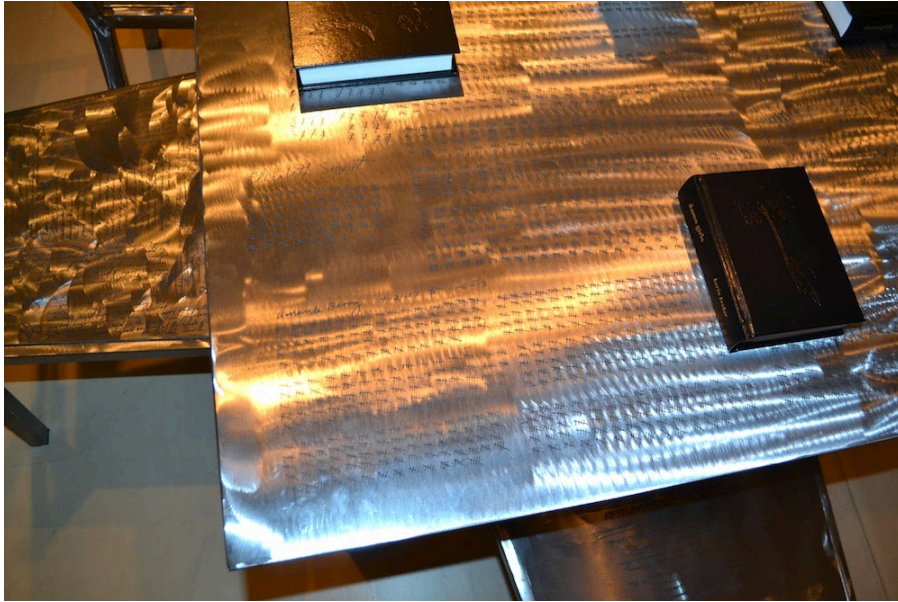
Telephoning my mother I mentioned what I had jokingly said to my doctor about developing such sores. Mom's heartfelt response was "that would be the answer to my prayers".

The idea that women and girls are held, often for years, as sex slaves in contemporary America has a special horror for us. These news stories hold our dread attention even when we want to turn away. [Elizabeth Smart](#). [Jaycee Dugard](#). [Michelle Knight](#). [Amanda Berry](#). [Gina DeJesus](#). Personally, no horror novel could ever compare to the feeling I got reading Emma Donoghue's [Room](#), a chillingly believable fictional account of a woman held captive by such a madman. Broker wants you to think about these girls. The raw facts are in the book, but even more potent is *too hot, too cold*, a table and six chairs, made of steel, and inscribed with writing.



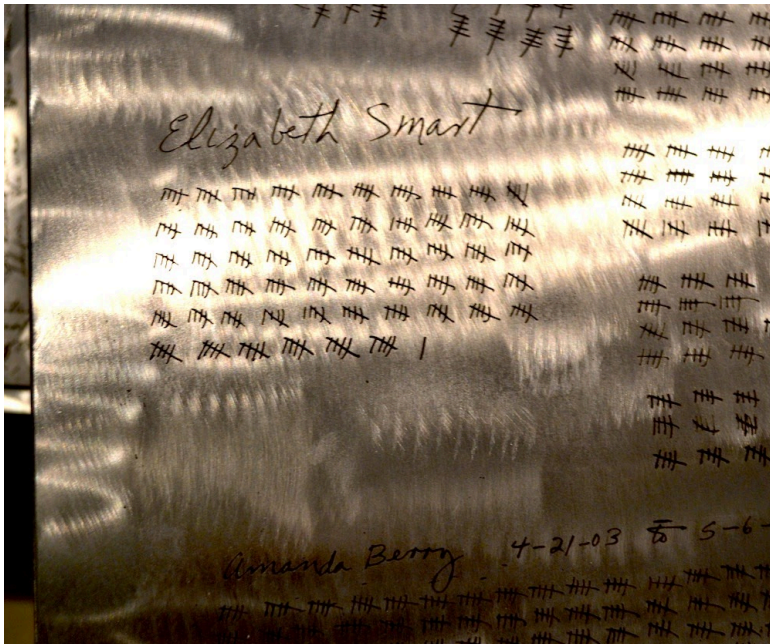
Karin Broker, *too hot, too cold*, 2014, steel table and six chairs, table 30 x 60 x 36 inches, chairs 35 x 18 x 16.5 inches each.

too hot, too cold is a very uninviting dinner table. Cold hard steel and sharp corners demand a certain carefulness on the part of viewers. The flat surfaces are inscribed with scratchy little marks.



Karin Broker, *too hot, too cold*, 2014, steel table and six chairs, table 30 x 60 x 36 inches, chairs 35 x 18 x 16.5 inches each.

At first, it's hard to see what the marks on the table are. They make a kind of pattern and give the table a texture.



Karin Broker, *too hot, too cold* (detail), 2014, steel table and six chairs, table 30 x 60 x 36 inches, chairs 35 x 18 x 16.5 inches each.

Then when you bend down and look closely, you see thousands--tens of thousands-- of

hashmarks, like the cartoon image of a prisoner in a dungeon counting the days as they pass by marking them on the wall. Each hashmark does in fact represent a day--a day that a girl was held captive as a sex-slave by a psychopath. Etched into steel, suggests that Broker wants to make sure these dreadful occurrences aren't swept under the carpet of history. And Broker wants you also to remember the names of women held as slaves in [Magdalene Asylums](#), so she writes those down in steel, too. It's overwhelming.



Karin Broker, *too hot, too cold* (detail), 2014, steel table and six chairs, table 30 x 60 x 36 inches, chairs 35 x 18 x 16.5 inches each.

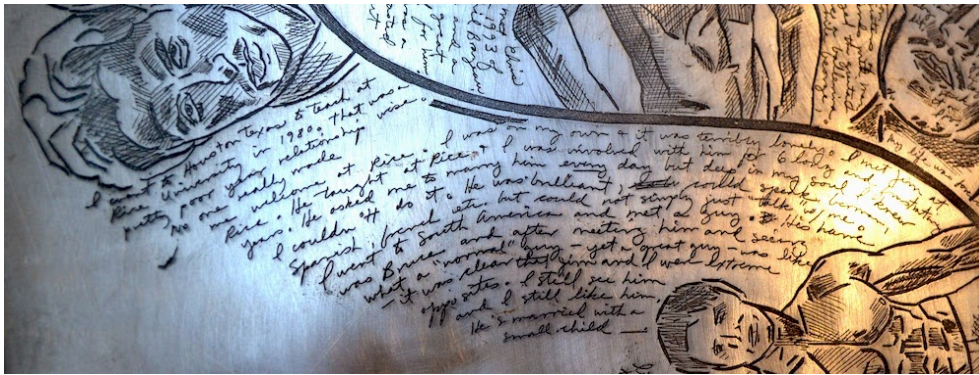
The six chairs relate to the six chapters in the book. The table and chairs, though much more modest in scale, will remind one of [The Dinner Table](#) by [Judy Chicago](#). Two tables, two works of feminist art. But *The Dinner Table* is beautiful. Indeed, it intends to overwhelm the viewer with its beauty. It has place settings for a group of women from history and myth, honoring each one with a gorgeous and unique table setting. It is a banquet, an impossible *sacra conversazione* amongst the great women of history. It is a *lush* work.

The cold grey steel of *too hot, too cold* is quite different. There are no beautiful table settings here, no embroidered table cloth or floor coverings. The furniture is minimal, uncomfortable and slightly threatening. It belongs in a prison or an institution. Its virtue is that it is indestructible. It will survive. Five hundred years from now, when the threads in *The Dinner Party's* embroideries have frayed and faded, and the ceramic place settings are broken and chipped, *too hot, too cold* will still be here. It's cold chairs and unyielding table top will say, "Fuck you. We survived."



Karin Broker, *I/Eye Gone*, 1995, etched steel bench, 48 x 15 x 19 inches

Broker includes two more pieces of steel furniture in the exhibit. *I/Eye Gone* includes an etched image--a self-portrait?--where the face has been erased.



Karin Broker, *Taking Self*, 1995, etched steel bench, 48 x 15 x 19 inches

Taking Self, on the contrary, is entirely autobiographical. With drawings and blocks of handwritten text, Broker outlines her entire life on the surface of this metal bench.



Karin Broker, *Taking Self*, 1995, etched steel bench, 48 x 15 x 19 inches

In choosing this medium, Broker says that her story, too, will survive. She's written it in solid steel. I am reminded of the main character in Will Self's novel, [The Book of Dave](#). In the book, Dave perversely writes the story of his life, his custody battle and his futile career as a men's rights activist on steel plates, accidentally creating the foundational documents for a future post-apocalyptic misogynist religion in the process. Maybe that's what Broker has done here. She has created an uneffaceable women's history, tablets that some future Joseph Smith--or perhaps Josephine Smith--will find and found a new religion with.



Karin Broker, left: *my white skin, off white* and right: *my white skin I*, 2014, monoprint and collage, 27.75 x 39.25 each

In the end, flowers wither and fade (but with luck, are ever renewed). The lives of women come to an end. But steel endures at least a little while longer.

[Damn Girls](#) is on view at McClain Gallery through May 31.