

Feminism on the drawing board

By Molly Glentzer
May 23, 2014

What does it mean to be a strong woman in a man's world?

In gallery shows that are up through this week, two established Houston artists broach the subject in black-and-white drawings on materials designed for home construction.

Karin Broker, who's taught at Rice University since 1980, proposes the enormous, prickly question with some enormous, prickly drawings made in conte crayon on Formica in her exhibition "damn girls" at McClain Gallery. Laura Lark, who also works as a fiction writer, projects a Valley of the Dolls'-eye view with her "Night Gallery" series, rendered in Sharpie ink on Tyvek, at Devin Borden Gallery.



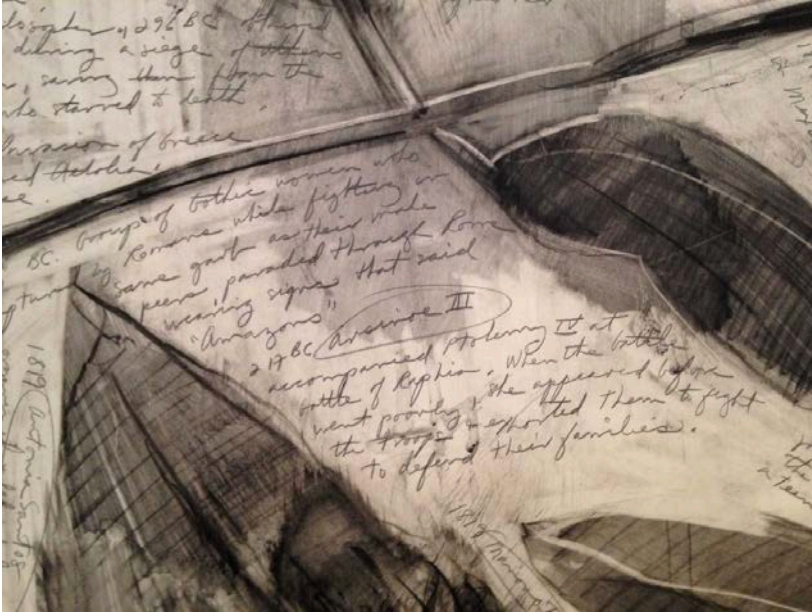
The centerpieces of Broker's show are nine monumental floral still lifes, a theme she's mined for years, although recently she's made mostly small, three-dimensional objects. From a distance, sitting on one of the artist's etched steel benches, you could get lost in the romance of these giant new memento mori. Formally composed from a formidable toolbox of traditional drawing techniques, rich with contrast and shading, they evoke Dutch masterworks materialized from smoke.

Closer inspection yields a surprise: Broker has scrawled a dense layer of text around the voluptuous rose blossoms, tulips and amaryllis. Over who knows how many years, she's made dozens of lists of facts, grouped thematically, to tell an unsettling story of all women since the dawn of recorded history and literature.

There are reminders of powerful women in lists of Nobel Prize Laureates, female military leaders and comic-book heroines, but mostly Broker is not writing a pretty picture. She has unearthed thousands of names to memorialize martyrs, accused witches and other women who have been criminalized, executed, murdered and otherwise subjected to brutalities, abuse and injustices. She also includes insensitive jokes about women and incendiary ideas from some of history's most influential men. (Here's Martin Luther: "If women become tired or even die, that does not matter. Let them die in childbirth; that is why they are here.")

An installation view of the etched steel table and chairs "too hot, too cold" with monoprint and collage works is among the monoprint and collage works featured in "Karin Broker: damn girls" through May 31 at McClain Gallery.

For viewers who may not have the patience to absorb all the information from the wall, Broker has transcribed the text from seven of the drawings into a small, 328-page hand-bound leather book. (Made in a limited edition of 20, the books are sold with the works.) Keep one near a table, and you could provoke some dynamic dinner discussion.



A detail of Karin Broker's "fighting pretty," one of the monumental drawings on view through May 31 in "damn girls" at McClain Gallery

In a back gallery, some of the books sit on top of "too hot, too could," her etched steel table with six chairs. Visitors are encouraged sit down, read and share their thoughts on the books' note pages. Some of the responses have as much shock value as Broker's material: "When I was young ... my father came home from a neighbor's party drunk and shaved my mom's hair off because she danced with another man at the same party."

The walls of this intimate space have been painted a soft aqua, a Martha Stewart kind of color; and hung with a beautiful series of monoprint/collage botanicals called "my white skin." As detailed as the big drawings but made with dress patterns, printed ephemera from vintage books and old documents, they're rendered in soft tones that give them a peaceful, domestic sensibility.

Lark's drawings, also obsessive in their attention to detail, are cooler and intentionally distant, suggesting the dulling effect of mass media on the psyche. To create her imagery, Lark projects vintage color photographs onto her support material. "Night Gallery" takes its name from a Rod Serling TV series that featured horror stories. It aired from 1969 to 1973, and Lark's subjects - all women - appear to be from the same mod era. They get their power from sex appeal, wearing armor that includes big hair and perfectly applied makeup.

The most compelling drawings of the series have a film-noir vibe, including "Arena," whose figure emerges from deep blackness; and the nearly abstract "Nettie," a pointillist marvel depicting the torso of a bride with a big bouquet.

Both artists, coincidentally, also "appear" in their shows through large self-portraits. Broker's "5'6"," on a huge panel of laminated sand-blasted steel, is powerfully minimal. Placed opposite her table and pretty monoprint/collages, it's like a stern hostess, containing no froufrou flowers - just a pair of targets that mark the height of her head and genitals, with a chain and an iron weight attached to the latter.

Lark's "As You Were," a large oil painting on wood, shows her sitting in a chair in the desert. She's obliterated her face with big smudges of yellow and brown, which makes you wonder: Was she just not pleased with the head, or is she acknowledging that even strong girls aren't in control in a harsh, stark environment?

'Karin Broker: damn girls'

When: 10 a.m.-5:30 p.m. Tuesday-Friday, 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Saturday; closing reception and panel talk with Karin Broker, Sally Sprout, Caitlin Hanson and Kelli Vance 1 p.m. Saturday

Where: McClain Gallery, 2242 Richmond

Tickets: Free; 713-520-9988, mcclaingallery.com

Also see: "Karin Broker: wired, drawn, and nailed," through Aug. 31; Art Museum of Southeast Texas, 500 Main, Beaumont; 409-832-3232, amset.org.

'Laura Lark: Night Gallery'

When: 11 a.m.-6 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday

Where: Devin Borden Gallery, 3917 Main

Tickets: Free; 713-256-0225; devinborden.com

