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### **Female Heroism: One Portrayal, Four Portraits**

The film “The Silence of the Lambs” begins with a woman running. Clarise Starling (Jodie Foster) is traversing the training course at the F.B.I. Academy. Sweating, panting, she crashes through the brush to rising music. In this scenario, contradictory readings emerge. An image of a woman running becomes an image of a woman being chased. Victim fantasies are activated. We almost begin to root for her to get away. The revelry is snapped by the appearance of a rope ladder. Clarise is back on the training course, secure on F.B.I. turf – her only assailants, the competing harrisons: Fatigue and ambition. This brief sequence foreshadows many overlapping themes and events in the film: the hunter and hunted (Clarise runs both from and towards things), the labyrinth or obstacle course, and the process of transformation (from neophyte to initiate). During her transformation from student to hero Clarise must travel a twisting path through real dungeons and basements into the depths of her own memory while amassing the clues to her revelation.



In her recent installation at American Fine Arts Gallery, Jessica Stockholder turns the house inside out and sends you in to look for something. She turns the house inside out, exposing the beams and seams, the work of nails and needles. Raw wooden beams crisscross the space muscularly – but the piece does not seem muscle bound. There is an awareness of impermanence and vulnerability – like a fort made of upended lawn furniture and blankets. Two sofa cushions creep up a pole, clinging there above the fray, subtly anthropomorphizing the column. It becomes a contemporary caryatid – skinny as a rail with gigantic breast implants.

The installation exists somewhere between a barn-raising and a house-wrecking. It is a site of transition and transformation. There is no privileged point of view in the piece – no best vantage point. To understand it requires a journey through it. Around the walls, behind the curtains, hides the core of the piece – rows of stacked cardboard boxes. You get the feeling the artist could come in here any minute and extend the installation – rip open the cartons and add their contents to the sprawl. Or, the boxes could contain objects she’s packed away, secret items she doesn’t want us to see. These mysterious, mute boxes make a striking juxtaposition to the raucous collage of objects and materials around them. Finding them is like coming upon a closed closet door at the end of a maze of rooms. Have you the courage to look inside? Do you really want to know?

Like other examples of her work, in this installation Stockholder’s gestural manner with materials pushes her across boundaries between mass and place, shape and surface. In her work, objects get painted, “coverings” (carpets, cloth, linoleum) get recovered, surfaces (walls, floors) get resurfaced (with tape, paper mache, etc.) She calls our attention to

“skins” – how they can change, multiply, and interrupt the identities of things. Emphasizing skins, Stockholder plays punningly with “hides”. Her pieces, conglomerates of the scavenged, the bought, and the hand wrought, are visual amalgams – multiple meanings are wrung from the works as the viewer examines the scramble. Stockholder’s installation is organized around sweeping gestures and dramatic color notes that put one in mind of abstract expressionist painting, or earlier, romantic history painting. The installation could be described in these terms – bold swipes of color and shape disgorge a loose-limbed narrative in which one detects, discovers, and like a character in an ancient Greek tale, gathers up bits of a fragmented self.

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For Clarise the process of transformation requires equal parts education and intuition. As she runs the gauntlet between Jack Crawford, the head of Behavioral Sciences at the F.B.I., and Hannibal Lector, “Hannibal-the-Cannibal,” the imprisoned mad-genius who offers to help her, on her way to confronting Buffalo Bill, a currently active serial killer, she learns to balance calculation and spontaneity. Strict adherence to the rules may deprive her of a chance for advancement; impulsive action might alienate her from sources of power and knowledge.

Crawford, her F.B.I. mentor encourages her deductive skills and powers of observation. Yet he can be subtly dismissive, exclusive as to his agenda, even downright demeaning. In a scene at a small town funeral home Crawford smoothes a local sheriff’s ruffled ego, playing upon good old boy customs at Clarise’s expense. She does not protest but takes the rebuff, fuming. Later, her satisfaction comes as she hustles the coffee-guzzling cops out of a room where she and other agents will examine the body of Bill’s latest victim. In her best West Virginia accent she drawls after them to “git on outta here”, shooing them away like a pack of schoolboys. Clarise has learned to pick her battles – sometimes, courtesy gets one further than a curse. However, politeness can be tinged with sarcasm – the note of condescension she attaches to the word “sir” in addressing the despicable Dr. Chilton, Lector’s keeper. She unlocks the puzzling anagrams that Lector tosses at her, matches his cunning with her own slipperiness. When she stumbles in his snares she relies on frankness, catches him off guard with her candidness.

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“he, he” says the painting. The viewer hardly knows whether this skittish laughter is prompted by a sense of exhilaration or doom. The painting is by Suzanne McClelland, whose raw but vigorously worked canvasses combine drawing, painting, and writing, splattered paint and chunks of clay. The words McClelland uses in her paintings evoke time-now, someday, always. The surfaces of the paintings speak of process. Although her works with words nervously scratched into spare and spacey fields have been most compared with the works of Cy Twombly, they are less sentimental and nostalgic. McClelland is less a transcriber, invoking names associated with the glorious past, than

she is a marker of her own edicts. “Now,” written bold, is a demand. “Always,” written backwards and forwards is an oath that stretches from the past into the future. “Someday,” is a shaky promise. Her words do not site orderly upon the page—they float and scatter, flip themselves over, multiply, bulge and shrink. Often it is difficult to discern the words, to differentiate between what is a letter and what is a random skein of paint, a smudge of charcoal or a pool of acrylic medium. In this McClelland’s work can be compared to the late work of Jackson Pollock. The control he exerted over line – at times allowing it to meander freely in space, at others roping it in to delineate a form – seems analogous to McClelland’s vacillation between chance and will.

In “he, he” McClelland disperses her chicken scratch h’s and e’s all over the top and down the sides of the square canvas. Like giddy laughter the “he’s” roil and tumble. Some of the letters are reversed, making it “eh, eh” and giggles give way to a relentless humming and hawing, in impediment to speech. Another glance and “he, he” is not a joke at all. *He* is everywhere – it makes one minds of the male omnipresence in painting. It challenges one to consider what it is like to be young and female and possessing a mostly male pantheon of artistic influences, of being on the receiving end of that most backhanded or compliments – “she paints like a man.”

The painting is not dominated by he’s, however. From the bottom right, extending up into the center of the painting McClelland has ignited a big white flash. This whiteout or whitewash floods the work with light and air. It is simultaneously rejuvenating and destructive – like Bataille’s light which casts one into darkness, a blinding light. It washes away the he’s, it laughs Shiva-like at the mayhem. It is a cleansing light, but not virginal – testimony to an ability of McClelland to make things delicate without making them prissy, to make them elegant without smothering them in taste.

In her paintings, McClelland fuses deeds and words, engages the material and the spiritual. Looking on of her smeary encrusted surfaces you take stock of what you are. Reading one of her words reminds you of what you hope to become.

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When calculation and deduction will not do, Clarise Starling risks defiance. Instructed not to approach the glass of Lector’s cell, she ignores the caution almost immediately and steps up at Lector’s urging. She does not do this cavalierly, however; her face is tense, she knows what is at stake when she “rolls the dice.”

Clarise, like the serial killer she stalks, is covetous. Eager, studious, ambitious, what she loves most is advancement. She desires power and seeks knowledge. She identifies with the powerful men around her – the cool professionalism of Crawford, the “high-powered perception” of Lector. She seeks confirmation from a male dominated society but, in her questing, she does not ignore or discount her own experience of the world. Clarise’s personal memories, however painful, are a source of strength, comfort, and wisdom to her. Recalling her father’s funeral she is reminded of how she survived abandonment.

Her familiarity with the culture of girlhood – glitter nailpolish, pierced ears and jewelry boxes where secrets are stashed, serve her in her detective work. She “knows” Buffalo Bill’s victims. Like her they are Southern, small town, white and female. Her empathy invigorates her hunt for the victimizer. Clarise is, as Lector deduces, a “well-scrubbed, hustling young rube with a bit of taste” whose dreams take her beyond the world of her policeman father into the realm of Fathers, the governmental organization, the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

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Lisa Hoke is the daughter of a Navy test pilot. She speaks of a childhood spent earthbound with her mother and sister while her father “flew around up there.” In her artwork Hoke challenges her childhood condition.

Over the past five years Hoke has been hanging her pieces from the ceiling. In her spare, elegant compositions of the late eighties, Hoke suspended metal wire and cast iron objects from the ceiling with exacting balance. Tautly controlled high wire acts, these works called for the precision and daring demanded when one puts natural laws like gravity to the test. With aerodynamic pieces, Hoke hurtled through space; in her more recent work, she hoists and hovers. Hoke is suspending things that look like they were never meant to leave the ground.

In “Manifold Destiny” Hoke created a woven hanging of car mufflers, exhaust pipes and plastic stripping from patio furniture. A post-industrial Penelope, she plaits suburban detritus and hangs it up like an emblem to bad vacations. In Hoke’s corroded crochet, rusted snaky pipes writhe against yellow and pink strips of plastic in a tableau of order and chaos – a Medusa in curlers. The effect is both funny and frightening.

Like the infamous tripping spider, Hoke weaves a tangled web. She makes use of the mixed messages implied by hanging – it is difficult to say for certain whether this piece is about the magic of levitation, a magic carpet replete with charmed snakes, or a banner to failure and defeat, plastic bonds squeezing the life out of squirming, exhausted pipes. At once vulnerable and menacing, fanciful and threatening, delicate and Herculean, “Manifold Destiny” has many implications. Hoke tempts the void, bravely dangles her objects above terra firma of fixed meanings.

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The risks Clarise Starling assumes in tracking Buffalo Bill culminate in her acceptance of Lector’s quid pro quo deal – he will trade information about the killer in exchange for access to Clarise’s most intimate childhood memories. This bargain satisfies both their cravings. Clarise wants to know what she suspects Lector knows. Lector wants to devour, if only metaphorically, human innards. He is a shrink after all. He craves to sample the ingredients of human souls, to examine the emotional viscera. In Lector, however, this desire is reified in a horrifying pathology – he *is* a cannibal. He reminds Clarise that he

kept no trophies (shrunken heads) from his victims – “No,” she deadpans, “you ate yours.”

Clarise takes this great risk, letter Lector inside her head, because she believes in the stability of her inner core. He may try to devour her, but he cannot dislodge her from her spiritual center. She knows it too well, inhabits it too deeply. Unlike James Gumm (Buffalo Bill’s real name) her attempts at change are not motivated by self-loathing. Gumm wants to remake himself, to reclothe his identity in a vestment of flayed female skins. Attempting to destroy himself he must destroy others. Clarise, although she identifies with others, does not try to become them. Her “psychic sense of place” is not compromised but is enhanced by the challenge she faces.

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Lawre Stone makes multi-layered paintings composed of given elements and chance operations. Her paintings begin with mottled surfaces of stained and dripped paint. On to this ground, she will sometimes hand write words. Then she drapes stencils onto her canvasses and traces the spirals or flower shapes. When the stencils are removed, thick oil color is swathed in the interspersing shapes. The net effect are paintings whose dizzying composition, aggressive paint handling and loud color make them hard to love – and just as hard to ignore.

Stone’s sense of color and her feel for surface and shape are as much incorporations of art history as expressions of the tones and texture of a Seventies childhood. One sees the eccentric surface and shape handlings of later Poons or early Benglis, the wiggly bimorphs of Art or Elizabeth Murray, the bright colors of Ree Morton or Wayne Theibaud. But Stone’s aesthetic is shaped as well by the orange and hot pink interior of Barbie’s Dream House and the swirling Op concoctions of a Spirograph set.

In “Her Master’s Voice” Stone lays down the voice of a Surrealist master – Andre Breton – extolling the virtues of the movement’s muse Gala Uluard: “She is a creature of grace and promise, close in her sensibility and behavior to the two sacred worlds of childhood and madness.” Upon the “foundation” of this eloquently stated, stereotypical view of the nature of womanhood, Stone builds a spiraling composition. New voices float up to the surface as the old sentiment is muffled by layers of cakey paint. Words such as “he,” “she,” and “of child” emerge. The beginning of “sacred” looks like “scared” or “scarred.” “Her sensibility” becomes “her sex.” Stone engages Breton in a “he said/she said” dialogue. As a woman seeking to engage and record her experiences with abstract painting, a traditionally male dominated mode of expression, Stone sees that it is vital to speak to, not only through, its means. One way Stone has of doing this is to make her painting evidence the turbulent feelings her ambitions bring. In her whirlpools of paint, her centrifugal compositions and her heavily stroked, garish color, Stone delights in the mingling of oil and water. She is interested, not simply in turning the tables, but in recording the spin.

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In the story of the screaming lambs, Clarise recounts how she – young, orphaned, a lost lamb herself – was awakened by the human-sounding cries of the spring lambs prepared for slaughter on her uncle's ranch. In the valiant attempt to save one lamb Clarise illustrated, with a child's guilelessness, her heroic nature. Early in life she revealed an inclination to be a liberator and protector. Punished by the rancher for her idealism, she did not abandon her ideals. These ideas, embedded in her spiritual center, are the ones that drive her in search of the serial killer.

Lector compels Clarise to expose through her story the kernel of her being. What she finds there – her essential heroic nature – gives her the strength and energy to attain her goal. Like some infernal Wizard of Oz, Lector helps her discover what she already possesses. It is her awareness of and belief in this defining internal knowledge that enables Clarise to learn from the men around her without become subservient to them, to depend on their assistance without becoming reliant upon them, to emerge from her education with her own experience of the world intact and at *her* service.