

Meliksetian MB Briggs



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Meg Cranston

LEO KOENIG INC. | 541 WEST 23RD

“Magical Death,” Meg Cranston’s most recent show, presented five portraits of the artist as a piñata. Papier-mâché mockups of the artist herself, “dressed” in colored-tissue outfits—striped pants, red shorts, shod in boots or adorned with an elaborate headdress—hung from the ceiling in a variety of poses. Fabricated by Cranston with the help of her art students, the pieces represented a semi-sincere attempt to portray her physically, as well as a direct send-up of the cult of the artist.

With Kippenbergeresque energy and wit, Cranston has been investigating aspects of body and soul for several years. Recent shows have featured drawings and sculptures of bad teeth and their imagined physiognomic significance, a large composite photograph of an average-size American, and a performance about the life of Marvin Gaye. This new work drew on Cranston’s long-standing interest in anthropology: The press release revealed that the word *piñata* derives from “pine of Attis,” Attis being a god of vegetation once worshiped in the Near East, whose devotees hung objects as offerings from pine trees and then felled them with sticks. With their westward migration from Asia Minor to Spain (and thence to Mexico), piñatas eventually evolved into Catholic effigies for the Seven Deadly Sins.

Cranston named each piñata *Magical Death* (all 2002) after a 1973 ethnographic film depicting the shamanic ceremonies of the Yanomami people of Brazil. In the film, the Yanomami attack effigies of the children of

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enemy tribes, inflicting a “magical death” that ensures the Yanomami’s own survival. Cranston invites members of the audience to enact a similar ritual murder on her own pendant form—if they would be willing to pay for the pleasure by buying the work.

A certain self-laceration undergirds the project, as it probably does all forms of self-portraiture, yet Cranston manages, by holding the act of violence in abeyance, to make the implicit masochism almost funny. The element of “sacrifice” suggested in these Meg-shaped piñatas shares little with the “look at me” gloss of a Mariko Mori performance or the “I’m so pathetic” self-exposure in Tracey Emin’s work, the excessive narcissism of which (even if narcissism in reverse) only reinscribes the grandiosity of the Artist. Cranston’s far more modest art might consider the above a deadly sin. Her self-presentation doesn’t take itself too seriously; it just hangs there, fertile. Lurking somewhere behind its apparently hard conceptual shell is a sweetness you can almost taste.

—*Nico Israel*