

ARTWEEK

October 2006

Penelope Gottlieb at Nathan Larramendy Gallery

Exposing Hollywood for its rampant fakery would be an exercise in redundancy, akin to suggesting that corruption and special interests flow freely in Washington. But there are intricate, indirect routes available in the business of contemplating Hollywood's abuse of archetypal powers. In *Trans-Ethnic*, Penelope Gottlieb takes aim at a specific Hollywood transgression, the once-common practice of casting Caucasian actors in "ethnic" (i.e., non-white) roles, furthering racist and misanthropic values through the mass-indoctrinating forum of film.

A deeper resonance in Gottlieb's series, though, has less to do with pat censure of Hollywood's ethics than with the idea of America's acceptance of making up identity —of reinventing ourselves and our history — as we go along. Gottlieb, who has dealt with slippery and soft-focus issues of identity in past work, here extends her ongoing interest in examining layered meanings and areas of cultural subterfuge in the public sphere – commonly accepted lies passed off as truths. Audiences knew that Katherine Hepburn was not Chinese in the film *Dragon Seed* and that Shirley MacLaine is an ethnic makeover job in *My Geisha*.



Gottlieb knows from whence she speaks and renders. The Santa Barbara based artist has worked in Hollywood, and clearly juggles both a questioning attitude and a fetishistic appreciation for the elaborate, American-style ruse factory that is the movies. Part of what makes her art so seductive is its assiduous craft and detailed drafting, qualities cherished in the “commercial” and mass arts. Gottlieb brings a refined technical approach to her large – almost life-sized – pencil and acrylic drawings of, say, MacLaine, or Joan Collins (walking like an Egyptian in *Land of the Pharaohs*), replicated from vintage publicity stills. The artist sneakily encoded messages in the margins, the backdrops and the literal folds of fabric: She inserts fragmented views of parking lots in Santa Barbara, a community officially obsessed with faux Mediterranean architecture.

Sonya Wilde is the reclining mulatto Olympia in a still from the B-movie *I Passed For White*, and Gottlieb’s revised mis-en-scene includes the absurd presence of kudzu vines over her fainting couch. This infamously uncontrollable plant becomes a handy emblem of socially spiraling racist attitudes, fueled out of Hollywood’s dream machinery.

For sheer bedazzlement of scale and crispness of artistry, the show-stealers at the Larramendy Gallery are the larger works in the main room, but the ultimately more intellectually engaging pieces are images in which ghostly faintness prevails. In these, we are forced to concentrate and also to supply our own imagination in discerning the quasi-apparitional figures and scenery in *Jungle Princess* and *Love is a Many Splendored Thing*, clued into a vaporous reality at hand.

-- Josef Woodard