

Diana Quinby by Diana Quinby

Earlier this year, in 2020, Diana Quinby moved in to a new studio space located up on the second floor of a nineteenth century building in the suburbs of Paris. Upon opening the door at the top of a dark and narrow staircase, we step into a room that's not all that big, but that's nearly empty and bathed in natural light. The north-facing window looks out on to a courtyard and provides a view of the treetops from the neighboring gardens. A few large sheets of paper are set upon a table, and hanging on the walls we see four graphite drawings: two large-scale, half-length self-portraits and two drawings of cropped bodies, one representing a young man's torso, and the other a frontal view of a nude, truncated couple in which the man and the woman are pressed up against one another within the space of the sheet of paper. Given the brightness of the studio, the visitor has to move back and forth to find the right viewpoint from which to see the human forms emerging from the shiny and densely layered graphite.

Somewhat larger than life in scale, these cropped and oddly sensual bodies could surprise the viewer, as if she or he were standing before a fun-house mirror. The bodies are hardly young and smooth, like those we're so accustomed to seeing in films and in advertising. Breasts sag, bellies bulge and skin appears flabby, wrinkled or covered with marks that suggest hair. The artist isn't providing us with a particularly comforting image of ourselves. The terms "monkey-like" and "pelts of flesh" have been used by other art critics¹ to describe these drawings built up from countless overlaid lines, as though Diana Quinby wanted to bring the human body back to its primitive, animal-like state. At the same time, a sense of profound intimacy comes across in these drawings. Side by side, the male and female bodies touch one another. They give the impression that they're holding each other up by leaning against one another. Seen from the front or the back, they fill and extend beyond the edges of the paper. The tiny spaces between the bodies, where they don't quite touch, have been left blank. These discrete slivers of white take on compositional importance, opening up the pictorial space and lending sculptural presence to the bodies.

In the artist's self-portraits, her cropped, larger-than-life body often extends the full height of the sheet of paper, standing tall within the surrounding white space and appearing to hold up the paper's edges like a caryatid. In one large-scale double self-portrait, she depicts herself in half-length, standing next to a nude female torso and wearing a strange dress with undulating creases and folds more suggestive of skin than of fabric. The nude torso has been drawn in graphite and in red colored pencil, creating a carnal presence and generating confusion between the inside and the outside of the body, between skin and clothing.

¹ In texts by Judith Prigent and Yanitza Djuric.

From one self-portrait to the next, the artist's head and likeness are not always represented the same way. Her gaze, which is sometimes severe, almost as if she were provoking the viewer into a staring contest, conveys both the intensity of the drawing process and the uncompromising confrontation with the self. For the past fifteen years, self-portraiture has in fact been at the heart of Diana Quinby's artistic practice. She explains that this desire to draw herself, to literally probe herself through line, came to her while pregnant with her second child in 2005. Using neither a mirror nor photographs, she began to draw herself by looking down at what she could see of her body, from her chest to her feet. Standing nude before her sheet of paper, pencil in hand, she transcribed her fragmented vision of her temporarily deformed body. Hence the many "headless" self-portraits that would follow in years to come. Intrigued by these initial experimental drawings in which she attempted to "take into account", as she says, her experience of pregnancy, she subsequently "allowed" herself to use a mirror and, later on, after the birth of her son, to use photographs to further explore motherhood in drawing.

In the years that followed, this new direction in self-representation gained in breadth and scope: the artist began drawing herself, in graphite and larger than life, with other members of her family, most notably with her husband and adolescent daughter. In these works, she probes intimacy, attempting to express emotion and a state of being through figuration and mark-making. The choice of large-scale formats is significant, especially in that Diana Quinby, since her arrival in France in the early 1990's, has always worked in small spaces, such as the corner of a bedroom in her apartment, a "maid's room" up on the top floor of a Parisian building, or the attic of a suburban house. By working on formats as large as possible in these cramped spaces, the artist was able to create her own space, a pictorial space that she could literally inhabit through the investigation of line and gesture. Indeed, her drawings are not so much representations of figures in space as they are investigations into how bodies, and women's bodies in particular, occupy space.

Imposing and confrontational, these bodies take up space and affirm their presence. Neither seductive nor beautiful, they dare to reveal how the body is seen and felt by the artist at the moment her pencil makes contact with the paper. The series of truncated men and women could be seen as a commentary on the equality of the sexes, on the stability of couples, or on perseverance and aging. These couples who turn their backs to us seem to be looking out towards an invisible horizon that remains unknowable to the viewer, and that they must face together. At the same time, these truncated bodies, which are somewhat disturbing and even embarrassing in that they confront us with our own corporeality, can also be seen as composing a kind of landscape, a territory born of line and shades of grey. The multitude of

fluid lines leads the gaze into the materiality of the drawing, inviting the eye to imagine the movement of the artist's hand across the sheet of paper. In the series of backs, from one drawing to the next, the artist is experimenting with the subtle differences in composition and in the tonalities of grey. By slowly building up texture through line, she records the process of drawing while inscribing the skin with its own intimate history.

Diana Quinby's strange and highly personal artwork draws inspiration from many sources, most notably from her daily life and relationships but also from her experience as a printmaker, an art writer and an art historian. Her studies in art history, in France, led her to conduct research into the connections between art and feminism in the 1970's in Paris. As a native of New York, she was introduced to feminist art and art histories well before settling in France in 1993, and her drawings call forth the works of certain American women artists, such as the painter Joan Semmel, who has dealt with the reappropriation of the female body throughout her career. Quinby has expressed her admiration for the work of Alice Neel, Maria Lassnig and Miriam Cahn, and looking back further into art history, she cites the importance of women's self-portraits, namely those by Paula Modersohn-Becker, Charley Toorop, Kathe Kollwitz and Frida Kahlo.

Diana Quinby's decidedly figurative drawings can also be compared to John Coplan's photographs, and even to certain works by Lucian Freud. Because of her figures' convincing presence, it's tempting to label her work as realist, and some have even gone as far to say that her practice is hyper-realist². But a close look at her drawings quickly reveals that the pleasure and experimentation of mark-making takes precedence over the supposed realism of the figures. While her portraits and self-portraits are "more or less recognizable", to use the artist's words, they all possess a caricatural quality. There is something exaggerated about them that shows that the artist is looking to transcribe an emotional state rather than an exact likeness. The bodies, too, are out of proportion. They're deformed, cropped, stretched or shortened according to the demands of the composition. The hands, in particular, are often enlarged, perhaps to underscore the physicality of the drawing process and the importance of the eye and the hand working together.

Today, in her new studio, Diana Quinby has room to spread out. She can take up creative space as she likes. Going over to the table, she lifts up the large sheets of paper so that she can show a few small drawings underneath. They all represent quick self-portrait studies of her head, lightly sketched in pencil. Will she no longer feel the need to make large-scale drawings now that she has sufficient space for working? The artist has gone back in to a few of these drawings with watercolor. She clearly enjoys trying to give shape and expression to her portrait, attempting to capture emotional presence with a few overlaid strokes of transparent color. Perhaps a new direction is opening up for her.

² Carmelo Virone, in his essay for the catalog of the 8^{ème} Biennale Internationale de Gravure Contemporaine de Liège, 2011, p. 18.