



Klaire Lockheart: Feminine Attempts

November 16, 2019 – February 2, 2020



Feminine Attempt #1 (Dishes), 2014
oil on canvas, 75 x 30 inches



Val Prefers Dust and Cobwebs, 2015
oil on canvas, 72 x 30 inches



Lateesha Has Poise and Grace, 2015
oil on canvas, 81 x 33 inches



Hallie Brings Home the Bacon, 2016
oil on canvas, 84 x 33 inches

Long before the rise of selfie culture, and the spread of impulsive digital images to capture a moment, the creation of portraits and self-portraits were events that required great consideration. What would be worn? What setting would be used? Sitting, standing, or in action? What props would be included for symbolic effect? What pose, gesture, and expression would be planned? Would the artwork be a realistic representation of the person or would there be a bit of smoothing of the rough edges? Traditionally, painting a portrait or self-portrait has been an opportunity for the artist (and the model, if the artist is not working on a self-portrait) to think about the completed artwork as not just another picture, but as a stand-in for the sitter that will outlive that person.

It was during a graduate painting class at the University of South Dakota (USD) that Klaire Lockheart made the first portrait in what would become a series. The assignment was to create a self-portrait. A trip to a thrift store for clothing props led to the acquisition of a pair of spectacular boots, described by Klaire as “absolutely ridiculous.” “They were thigh high, difficult to lace, and impossible to walk in. They also made me over 6’ when I wore them. I, of course, had to buy them.” At this time, Klaire had been researching issues related to gender roles. The boots, the self-portrait, and ideas of what are and are not symbols of femininity merged in her painting, *Feminine Attempt #1 (Dishes)*.

In this painting, Klaire wears her absolutely ridiculous boots, but the boots are coordinated with clothing that is so conservative that the boots, dress, and apron all stand out due to the contrast. She stands in her kitchen, which feels like a very compressed space since her body fills most of the

canvas. Life-sized and in profile, she is in the process of doing the dishes. Her props are limited to the clothing, including the yellow rubber gloves, and the dishtowel and bowl. She stares at us, but only turns her head halfway toward us, so she looks at us from the corners of her eyes, with a serious expression. Klaire has painted the portrait in a realistic manner, and is no way idealizing herself as the subject.

Though this painting was completed before Klaire decided to create a series, *Feminine Attempt #1 (Dishes)* became a template for future paintings. The model stands in a confined, easy-to-identify room in the house. She wears a traditional dress and apron, representing one traditional role of women in the home. She also wears high-heeled boots or shoes as a nod to additional roles she is expected to play. She draws extra attention to the idea that she is playing a role or a number of roles by the title of the painting, with the word “attempt” indicating her uncertainty that she has succeeded in being completely feminine. The scale of the painting, with the model’s height augmented by the heels, coupled with a low angle, places viewers on the defensive, as the model looks back at the viewers from above.

However, this summary does not tell the story of how one class assignment led to a series that is powerful enough to be featured in an art museum. Klaire’s original intent was not for *Feminine Attempt #1 (Dishes)* to expand beyond the self-portraiture on which she had been working. The painting was installed where other students at USD could view and that’s where Angela viewed it. Angela had such a strong reaction to the painting that she asked to be the subject of a similar painting by Klaire. However, Klaire only wanted to continue if



Haven Takes after her Mom, 2016
oil on canvas, 84 x 33 inches



Feminine Attempt #3 (Chopping), 2015
oil on canvas, 78 x 30 inches



Sara is All and Does All, 2014
oil on canvas, 81 x 33 inches



Feminine Attempt #2 (Sweeping), 2014
oil on canvas, 81 x 30 inches

she was certain she would be able to build upon her original ideas. To maintain a form of consistency before beginning to paint, Klairé created a series of questions that she used to conduct an interview. The interview helped shape the direction of the portrait, and it provided quotes that could be used as titles. For Angela, her statement that she “maintains a happy face” not only provided the title, but was used ironically to determine the tone of the portrait.

By maintaining this consistent process as her series continued, Klairé was able to create additional paintings that worked well together and added to the experience Klairé had presented in her first self-portrait. Though the idea of a female artist creating a series of portraits of women does not sound extreme, Klairé was working against the tide of art history. There have been well-known artists in the past who have done this over the centuries: Artemesia Gentileschi, Angelica Kauffman, Mary Cassatt, and Cindy Sherman, for example. But much more common, of course, are portraits of women painted by men. As both the artist and a model, Klairé recognized the advantage she had to make a broader statement about the imbalance between the expectations and the reality for what women are supposed to be in our time.

At the physical and conceptual heart of the portraits are the aprons. Once Klairé completed the interview, she would sew several aprons from which she and the model would select the one that seemed best suited for each woman. The aprons are not merely props or decorative embellishments. They point directly to the “feminine attempts” women have made for generations. Klairé has said, “I had several women tell me that their mothers and grandmothers had different aprons for

actual work and aprons for when company came over so they could maintain the façade of perfection.”

With the interview completed and the apron made, Klairé and each model would choose a location in the house and a household task to perform. Klairé photographed the women from a low vantage point. Then she would go back to her studio and painted meticulously from the photographs to make sure that the expressions were captured, permitting the models, in Klairé’s words, “to share their displeasure about trying to fit in the role of femininity set by our culture.”

As a series, the twelve portraits present vivid examples of the continuing complex and, in the words of Klairé, “unnatural expectations of femininity.” Using the longstanding tradition of portrait painting to question longstanding gender role traditions, Klairé Lockheart presents artworks that are smart, droll, forceful, and even intimidating. She reminds us that the idea of having it all, that perfect blend of success and happiness as an individual, spouse, parent, and professional, is still harder for women to achieve than it is for men.

Klairé Lockheart was born in 1984 in Walla Walla, Washington, and moved with her family to Minnesota. She attended South Dakota State University in Brookings, where she received a Bachelor’s degree in art. After graduation, she taught art in Hinton schools for 6 years. She returned to school to earn a Master of Fine Arts degree from USD, completing her degree in 2016. Klairé continues to work in Vermillion, South Dakota.



Savannah is Lady Like. 2015, oil on canvas, 75 x 36 inches



Angela Maintains a Happy Face, 2014, oil on canvas, 75 x 36 inches

cover:

(L) *Janelle Has It All*, 2015, oil on canvas, 78 x 34 inches

(R) *Feminine Attempt #4 (Vacuuming)*, 2016, oil on canvas, 76.5 x 33.75 inches