

Abstract

Title of Dissertation / Thesis: FROM HERE TO HYPOXIA

Quintina Denine Smith, Master of Fine Arts, 2006

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The public's perceptions and expectations of flight attendants and the airline industry are highly skewed and far from reality. As a microcosm of the real world it mirrors society. Racism exists, terrorism is a constant concern, and the female flight attendant is still a victim of sexist attitudes and practices. Through the use of installation, photography, audio, and video I will explore these issues in depth offering a rare view into the behind the scenes world of the flight attendant.

FROM HERE TO HYPOXIA

By

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Chapter 1: Development

My work has always been about introspection and self-portraiture. I began the Master of Fine Arts program as a painter seeking to discover and capture on canvas my heritage and ancestry. I wanted to get to know intimately those who had passed on years before my birth. Using an old family photo album as a resource I would paint the small faded, black and white images life size or larger in an attempt to breathe life into them. I used various imagined shades of acrylic ochre and burnt umber. My style was expressive and gestural, and the paint was thick, impasto. I would dress these canvasses in collaged clothing pieces that challenged the viewer's perception by integrating the material with the paint - blurring the line between reality and imagery. I studied the images intently as I gleaned from them any little bit of information that was forthcoming, such as the tilted house on stilts in the background of one, or the West Virginian landscape of another. They were Black, White, American Indian, and Irish. I wanted to know who they were, where were they from and how they lived, and I wanted to document this information in the paint.

By the second semester I began to focus intently on the physical connection between myself and my ancestors which forced me to work with images of myself as well. As I compared my face to theirs looking to find any similarities, I began to introduce myself into the portraits through the use of photocopy and collage. In *Martilia and Wes*, the background is negated as the two figures are painted to fill the entire canvas. Their clothing is now made of a few under-developed brushstrokes as it is their faces that are

the focus. They were highly detailed with a photocopy of my eyes collaged atop my grandmother's. I began experimenting with other materials by painting on glass, as well as enlarging the images and printing them on transparencies to project them. Also, I began to introduce found objects. In one piece, an antique chair and a mirror was placed before a huge canvas onto which an image of my grandmother was projected. By the end of the semester the paint was fast becoming less important to the work than the photographs and the concepts.

In my continued search for self, Photography, which was initially used to gather resource material, had become the focus of my artwork. I began to digitally compose and alter the current photographs of myself with the scanned images of my ancestors. These were enlarged and printed out on various papers using a grid configuration. In some cases they were photographed again, then reprinted and collaged over a third time. Originally centering on the relationships between my female ancestors and myself, I felt a sudden need to introduce my husband into the images. I had recently wed and the thoughts of a female's role in society as well as in a marriage began to enter my work. Would I lose my identity as we became as one? I composed images of myself and my husband that were not obvious as to where one ended and the other began. It was also at this time that I began to take pictures of myself in my other world. Since my work centered on identity, I am who I am based on all facets of my life and that included the fact that I am a flight attendant. These images however had an adverse affect on me. Instead of composing and collaging images together, I wanted to leave the photographs as they were to make a statement in their own right. The airline industry has a unique identity of its own, one that

it has cultivated for the public, and one that is the reality as seen by flight attendants. And it is that dichotomy that I felt a need to expose. As I prepared for this new direction I used audio, video, and, found objects to further enhance my work. I had begun the Master of Fine Art program as a painter and have made a natural progression to conceptual artist.

Chapter 2: *From Here to Hypoxia*, The Exhibition

My thesis exhibition takes an in-depth look at the world of air travel from a view rarely seen - through the eyes of a flight attendant. Part documentary, and part social commentary, my show invites the viewer to come and take a flight with me as I cover many miles of social issues from the funny and mundane to more serious: sexism, racism, and terrorism.

In 1930, the first “stewardesses” were hired. They had to be nurses. They could be no taller than 5’4”, weigh no more than 115 lbs, and be no older than 25 years of age. They had to be single... and they had to be white. As the airlines had come to recognize the drawing power of these women to attract business they begun hiring them based on their looks - even going so far as to ask them to lift their skirts to allow the interviewer to see their legs. Once hired, make-up, hair- styles and clothing had to be perfect, stocking seams had to be straight and girdles had to be worn. These practices are unheard of by today’s standards, however it was this attitude that has cultivated a perception of the glamorous overly attentive flight attendant and the world of air travel that has persevered to this day. The word flight attendant or stewardess has become a pictorial convention immediately conjuring up an image of svelte beautiful white women serving up unlimited alcoholic beverages. *Sure Beats Picking Cotton!* is a portrait of that image. There is a mannequin in my flight attendant uniform perched high atop a beverage cart. Wearing high heels and a short skirt she sits posed in a sexy and provocative manner while the

repetitious sounds of a working flight attendant emanate from the cart, “Hello! Hello” “Bye-bye! Bye-bye!” “Something to drink? Something to drink” and “Fasten your seat belts!” As change was slow to come, it was another 30 years before they would hire black flight attendants. However just as in the real world racism still exists, this was something that was not always welcome by the flying public. The mannequin, representing me, is black, and in place of alcohol, freshly picked cotton bolls jam the cart spilling out on to the gallery floor. The title, *Sure Beats Picking Cotton!* is an actual quote from a white male passenger to a black flight attendant as she knelt down beside him to pull liquor from the cart.

By definition a concourse heel is a black leather shoe that must be 1 ½ to 2 ½ inches high and is to be worn at all times when not in flight. *Concourse Heel Size 8 ½ 1990 – 2006* is composed of fourteen pairs of black leather dress shoes displayed with the bottoms up covering an entire wall. The soles are well worn. These are my actual shoes that were used as concourse heels between the years of 1990 and 2006. On the bottom of each left shoe is a small white label that indicates the thousands of miles of flying that was done while wearing them and each pair has a thousand stories to tell. Having the bottoms displayed also draws attention to the height of the heels. While the airlines claim they are trying to maintain a certain level of professionalism, it should be noted that one could be just as professional in a ½ inch loafer style shoe that would be far more suitable for walking concourses that can be a quarter mile or longer. Lastly, while it is a uniform piece, it is not required of all flight attendants – the men are exempt.

The exhibition also includes a group of photographs that line the wall as if they were the windows of an aircraft. They are random and varied images that work in concert to create a feel for the industry as a whole. The once well-heeled business traveler has given way to the likes of those in *Layover* where a passenger sleeps unashamedly on the floor of the gate area and *Rotary International* where another sits in the boarding area in his bare socks. An empty jetbridge seems strangely futuristic in the staccato glow of its fluorescent lights. The image, *Crew Lounge*, exposes the not so glamorous side of the industry with a broken down recliner in front of a faded and peeling mural of a waterfall. And an unexpected photograph of a roll of duct tape beside a pair of handcuffs called *Post 911 Flight Attendant Security Kit* is the airline's resolution to the problem of defense for the flight attendants after the terrorist attacks of 9/11.

The last piece in the exhibition is a video installation entitled *From Here to Hypoxia*. It is named after the condition caused by a loss of oxygen to the brain during a decompression. In the few moments before anyone passes out, they are completely unaware that they have lost all control of their motor skills and are acting abnormal. A row of first class airplane seats equipped with headsets sit in front of a video monitor. The viewer is invited to sit down and experience the movie as though they are actually in flight. The movie is made up of a series of video clips that I filmed while working over the course of a few months. By holding the camera low in front of me gave it the appearance of merely hanging on its strap while allowing me the opportunity to gather candid shots of airport activities in concourses, jet bridges and airplanes all across the country. I wanted to catch every aspect of the flight attendant's experience. Using a

digital recorder, I interviewed my fellow flying partners probing them for their most memorable stories. They ranged from the humorous with a flight attendant dying her hair in the lavatory during an international flight, to the devastating September 11, 2001. Using the program Adobe Premier, I combined these stories and sound bits editing the speeds for further effect. Tying it all together is the hollow sound of my footsteps reverberating throughout the film, which adds a further continuity to the other pieces in my show. From the flight attendant mannequin and the images on the wall to the concourse shoes and the video, my thesis became a surreal walk through normal and abnormal world of a black flight attendant.

Bibliography

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