

Embodied Ideals

Frances Ferdinands

Buffalo Arts Studio

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Adornment, 2003

The paintings in Frances Ferdinands' *Embodied Ideals* series are ambitious and heavy with sociocultural implication. While the images, rendered in Ferdinands' lush, bold style, are worthy as aesthetic achievements alone, the coupling of these images, taken from classic paintings and magazine ads, produces a recombined and newly relevant mix of meaning and composition to the work.

By recreating the images rather than simply borrowing the originals, Ferdinands cleverly softens the contrast between the paired pictures. This same muting of contrast is also accomplished in some of the pieces by alignment of similar compositional elements, as with the hardwood floors in *Adornment*, or the balconies in *Balcony*.

In some of the other paintings, however, Ferdinands seems to deliberately accentuate this contrast, as with *Insider's* pronounced border, clearly delineating the socioeconomic division between the elaborately dressed model hawking colored toilet paper on the left and the busy prostitute on the right. Another study in contrast is *America*



Balcony, 2001

These improbable pairings are indeed greater than the sum of their parts. Each image yields new significance from the other's context. The interplay inherent in the diptych format produces a perpetually shifting dynamic of meaning, as each portrait comments upon the other.

ca, wherein a glamorous woman, luxuriating in the opulence of her fur coat, is easily trumped by the gritty vision of a dour diner, clearly less happy in her ratty fur collar. The painting effectively illuminates the incongruities inherent in America's own self-image, with its impossible promise and often harsh realities.

America also underscores a central theme in the series: the difference in motivations between the artist and the advertiser. The artist attempts to mirror reality, while the advertiser's goal is to enhance it. Perhaps the best illustration of

the concept is *Adornment*: the attractive woman in her Dior gown is all surface, while the floor strippers next to her represent the artist's attempts to dig deeper, to scratch beneath the surface of visual perception. Truly, both the artist and the advertiser is embodying ideals in these images, but the artist's ideals are his own, and his work an effort to realize his vision, while the advertiser attempts to echo the ideals of his audience in an effort to loosen their purse strings.

The text adds yet another layer of meaning, uniting each work as a whole and pulling the viewer into the third dimen-



Insider, 2002-2003

sion, both literally and figuratively, putting a new perspective on each pairing. While the intended message behind these disparate phrases may seem hard to divine, there are certainly areas where it comes into focus, as with the phrase "market value" hovering over the prostitute in *Adornment*.



America, 2000

And then there is the perspective of time; the fourth dimension. The advertising images, from post-war haute couture fashion and perfume ads, symbolize America's rising standard of living and the ensuing changes in the way clothes were designed. Form no longer followed function in the wardrobes of many American women of the era; instead aesthetic concerns took the fore. Many U.S. designers were increasingly influenced by European fashion, as is evidenced here by the striking similarities the fashion images share with the significantly older artistic images. The age of these images reminds us that issues of consumerism, self-image, and capitalism's effect on art and fashion are nothing new, but have been with us since the moment we could afford to have such issues.

- Rebecca Moda,
Exhibitions Coordinator,
Buffalo Arts Studio

List of works:

- Standards*, 2003, Acrylic on Canvas 36'' x 60''
- Adornment*, 2003, Acrylic on Canvas 30'' x 66''
- Insider*, 2002-2003, Acrylic on Canvas 48'' x 72''
- Knock Out*, 1987-1988, Acrylic on Canvas 48'' x 66''
- User Friendly*, 1997, Acrylic on Canvas 44'' x 48''
- Balcony*, 2001, Acrylic on Canvas 36'' x 48''
- Bewitched*, 2000, Acrylic on Canvas 36'' x 54''
- America*, 2000, Acrylic on Canvas 36'' x 66''