

Jennifer Dalton, What Does an Artist Look Like? . . . , 436 snapshot photographs (approx. 40 feet long), 2002. Courtesy the artist and Plus Ultra gallery.

Clinical Studies

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Artist Jennifer Dalton Casts a Critical Eye on the Systems that Mythologize Artists.

Jennifer Dalton is the art world's private cardiologist, diagnosing its many disorders through an examination of its systems. Since graduating from Pratt in 1997, she has started two ongoing bodies of work that take a critical look at both the auction market and the influence of the press.

For her current, and as of yet unexhibited, interactive project Art Survey, she has been conducting market research on the top contemporary artists whose work appeared at auction in 2002. Postcards and an on-line questionnaire at www.jenniferdalton.com invite students, artists, art professionals, and art novices to rank artists such as Damien Hirst, Inka Essenhigh, and Gregory Crewdson according to a set of predetermined attributes including their "trendiness," "sexiness," and their value as a financial investment. The survey also asks participants to describe themselves in general terms by their gender, astrological sign, and relationship to art. While humorously investigating the often neglected issue of whether Capricorns look at art differently than Libras, on a more serious level Dalton seeks to gauge whether the auction houses reflect general taste or whether they perpetuate their own isolated, self-serving set of standards.

Dalton evaluates another seminal system of influence—the press—in What Does an Artist Look Like? (Every photograph of an artist appearing in the New Yorker 1999-2001, a version of which was installed at the Plus Ultra gallery in Brooklyn in 2002. For this project, she clipped images of writers, musicians, dancers, filmmakers, visual artists, designers, and architects profiled in three years' worth of New Yorker issues. Dalton then laminated the cards and mounted them in chronological rows separated by genre, so that one line consists entirely of artists and the next is either architects or dancers. In addition to genre, she color-coded the portraits by gender (white for women, black for men, and gray for co-ed groups)











What Does an Artist Look Like?..., 2002 (detail).

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Every Adjective Used to Describe Artists & Their Work, pencil on paper [14 x 10 in.], 2002 [detail].

and then ranked the degree to which the image depicts the artist as either a "pin-up" or a "genius," according to her own criteria. The captions, written in Dalton's neat rolling script below the images, identify the subject and mark the extent to which the photograph, not the artist, represents intellectual accomplishment, glamour, or preening erotic allure. Iris Murdoch is portrayed hunched over her typewriter in deep concentration whereas LiT Kim wears a bikini top and gazes blankly ahead. Through this simple juxtaposition, Dalton brilliantly exposes the mechanisms she sees as "either exalting or degrading the people the New Yorker portrays as embodying creativity."

At the Plus Ultra gallery show in 2002, Dalton accompanied What Does an Artist Look Like? . . . with its verbal equivalent, a hand-written booklet listing the adjectives used to describe male and female artists in Artforum's "the Best of 2000" issue. There is only one column describing women artists or their work [as "supernaturally sweet," or "nice," etc.l, while the adjectives devoted to describing male artists continue on for pages. The egregious contrasts between the two are less striking than the sheer underrepresentation of women artists.

Dalton does not let her pseudo-bureaucratic projects become sterile or didactic. Instead, they are personal documents of her engagement with the art world's fashions and expectations. The pages she re-photographs from the New Yorker are not pristine, off-the-newsstand copies; they are crinkled and worn, proof that she has carefully and critically read this publication targeted to self-defined sophisticates. Dalton states that "it is really important for me that I maintain a functional relationship with the object, instead of fetishizing it. I want to take a snapshot, instead of trying to get the best photograph." Dalton, who crafted and confronted her opinions about contemporary art as a freelance critic, writing exhibition reviews for publications including Tema Celeste and Coagula, concludes, "My criticism has melded into my work. Now my work is very art critical."