

Kathe Burkhart: *King Dong*, 1999, from the "Liz Taylor" series, acrylic, mica on canvas, 78 by 90 inches; at Mitchell Algus.



Kathe Burkhart at Mitchell Algus, Participant Inc. and Schroeder Romero

If for no other reason than that she introduced the term "Bad Girl" into art discourse—in a 1990 interview in *Flash Art*, some four years before New York's New Museum adopted the term for its landmark exhibition of the same name—Kathe Burkhart has earned a place in art history. In her paintings of that time, Burkhart struck a chord by targeting the transgressive quality of hysterical female behavior, underscoring the undeniable power of the rage, abuse and masochism that psychologists too often dismiss as "low self-esteem." More than 10 years later, Burkhart's insights seem even more on the mark, and she has neither tamed nor toned down her particular brand of exhibitionism.

Burkhart is best known for her "Liz Taylor" series, ongoing since 1983, with the most recent additions on view at Mitchell Algus. Based on film stills and tabloid snapshots of the star's ups and downs, both on screen and off, these cartoonish paintings ostensibly utilize media depictions to confront our attraction-repulsion response to female body types

and behaviors. For instance, the large, multipanel *The Four Elements* (2000) reads almost as a Rorschach test of sexual stereotypes in its depiction of the movie star in four different poses against brightly colored backgrounds.

While one might be tempted to see Burkhart's work as a kind of Pop art, her approach is far more rude than Lichtenstein or Warhol ever sought to be. She employs an in-your-face aggressiveness more akin to Tracey Emin or early Sue Williams. She also has another thing in common with Emin and Williams: autobiography. Throughout the "Liz Taylor" series, the artist makes use of Taylor's public setbacks and triumphs, her physical transformations and movie roles, as surrogates for personal confessions. In *Shut The Fuck Up!* (2002), Taylor's blood-red, rather phallic fingernails are pressed over the lips of a black man, a gesture that could be interpreted as a prelude to an illicit kiss or as the artist's own retort to the critics in her audience. Even more pointed—literally and figuratively—is *Suck My Dick* (2002), in which the artist has attached a big black dildo to Taylor's crotch. Protruding a good 12 inches off the canvas, this intervention makes the star

simultaneously grotesque and erotic. It also inverts the masochistic insatiability displayed in Taylor's roles in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* and *Suddenly Last Summer*. Adding another layer to this depiction of sexual ambivalence, Burkhart places Liz against a background of rejection letters that the artist has received from publishers, critics and galleries. For Burkhart, the ever-marrying Taylor (who transcends sexual frustration by risking public humiliation) is a model of self-empowerment, not unlike the artist herself.

As this work has evolved, it appears that portraiture, rather than appropriation, is Burkhart's true focus. At Schroeder Romero, the artist exhibited drawings of medieval torture devices that alternatively could be used to interrogate witches and other wayward women or function as delightful additions to bondage rooms. Each was titled with the name of one of the artist's recent lovers. At Participant, Burkhart exhibited wall texts made from 5-inch-high chocolate letters—imported from Holland where for Christmas parents give children their names in chocolate. Burkhart spelled out such delectable phrases as "Please tell me how much longer this pleasure will last before it turns to shit." She also showed a recent series titled "Authorized Portraits," paintings displaying

only the date of birth and Social Security and phone numbers of her subjects, who themselves selected the colors of the two-tone canvases from an array of Pantone chips.

For Burkhart, it seems, identity is up for grabs, and so it is in a world that encourages such exhibitionism and public intrusions into privacy as *Survivor* and *The Jerry Springer Show*. It may be this artist's true talent to point out that despite all this sharing of personal information, we have become neither more tolerant nor accepting, and we still know a transgressor when we see one.

—Barbara Pollack