



Anna-Wili Highfield, *Spirit Faces*, 2017, installation view

Spirit Faces

Anna-Wili Highfield at Olsen Gruin in New York City
by Christopher Hart Chambers

Up front by the gallery's storefront window on the Orchard Street strip on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, which is now perhaps the premier location for current fine art, stands a construction of sheet brass shards, with straight, thin brass rods projecting outwards in all directions, extending like rays of light or exclamation points. Each has a pearl at the end. Two life sized cut outs of female hands gloved in black spray paint are scratched with squiggly linear designs revealing the underlying brass color. Towards the base, wingy thingies repeat the five fingers, and other formations of cut

out metal sheeting describe a face, a horse's leg and hoof, a braid, and assorted crumpled abstractions. This all stands atop a black metal dowel welded to a waist high, four legged pedestal. This display device is used throughout this exhibition of ten free standing sculptures. One piece describes a horse head, another a goat with a hairy beard. The entire showing has a feathery feel, and in fact there are a few feathers involved in constructing the work, as well as reindeer fur, wool, and sea urchin spines. Birds are a frequent theme; and human faces or masks, and the ever present female

hand, either painted black or in blue velvet. Spikey protuberances abound and swirling appendages all allude to something about space and time. The work has a sketchy ornamental flavor; she avoids solid concrete form, instead indicating presence through innuendo in whispy renditions wherein the animal and human subjects are dreamlike stand ins for intention. They're like a glam rock fashionista Max Ernst. There are also a few small works along the same vein mounted on the walls.

Ms. Highfield hails from Sydney, and the work gives the impression of spiritual or mystical, even metaphysical allusions. The exhibition's title, *Spirit Faces*, clearly refers to aboriginal culture. (Ms. Gruin, the gallery director, hastened to inform with a wink, "We are not a marsupial gallery. We do show some of the best work coming out of Australia, but we also represent

talent from all over.”) Mounted on the back wall of the gallery is a life sized rendition of a roaring male lion’s head. Dangling rope and yarn complete his mane. So, indigenous wildlife is not Ms. Highfield’s exclusive inspiration, it is more about chimera. Near the lion, a fragmented human mask has a couple of tweety birds flitting about it. Loopy wires suspend the little birds while visually acting as trails to their paths of flight. Throughout the exhibition whirling brass wires enact an indication of the invisible made tangible; indicating time and motion. The recurring theme of feminine hands lends an element of self portraiture to the work; a portrayal of the interaction between the physical act of the artist’s creative practice and the more ethereal nature of her subject matter.



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