

BURNAWAY

Q&A: Jill Greenberg's *Glass Ceiling* at Hagedorn Foundation Gallery

Written By Grace Thornton on November 11, 2011



Jill Greenberg, GC2-247, 2010, archival inkjet prints, dimensions variable. Copyright Jill Greenberg, courtesy Hagedorn Foundation Gallery, Atlanta.

Jill Greenberg, whose feminist work traces back to her college days at Rhode Island School of Design, is now showing *Glass Ceiling* at **Hagedorn Foundation Gallery**. The bikini-wearing, high-heeled, beautiful-bodied women that Greenberg photographed from underwater in a swimming pool are feminine to a fault. They've lost their identities, appearing beheaded and drowned in awkward, contorted poses like misused Barbie dolls. "The images might be read as violent towards women," Greenberg notes in her artist's statement. "They are meant to be. This is what it feels like to exist in the female body."

One of the photographs depicts a woman in a red bikini and stilettos with legs splayed wide open and her head unseen above water, replaced by the blood-red glow of her bathing suit reflected on the surface. As the man standing next to me at the show's opening helpfully pointed out with a scoff, "Well, there's nothing subtle about that, is there?" He was absolutely right. Greenberg wasn't going for subtle, though. She wanted reflect the female experience, and my bet is that she knows what being a woman feels like better than that guy. And sometimes being a woman feels like being on display for random men who stare at you while you're splay-legged in a bikini and heels.

I wanted to understand how *Glass Ceiling* correlated to her previous feminist work, as well as to explore some of the ideas presented by the photographs, so I emailed a few questions that Greenberg graciously answered just before landing in Atlanta.



Jill Greenberg, GC2-298, 2010, archival inkjet prints, dimensions variable. Copyright Jill Greenberg, courtesy Hagedorn Foundation Gallery, Atlanta.

Grace Thornton: What difference in perspective does this work take from your previous feminist work in *The Female Object* and *Eve of the Future*?

Jill Greenberg: *The Female Object*, which I created for my senior thesis back in 1989, came from a postmodern feminist place. It was all about the internalized male gaze. It was very zeitgeist-y at the time, and it actually presaged Naomi Wolf's *The Beauty Myth*. It was based on my awakening that many of my "heroes" of photography, art, and literature seemed to be misogynists (**Helmut Newton**, **Henry Miller**).

I was deep into digital manipulating in 1996, when I made *Eve of the Future*, which posited that, if men could genetically engineer the woman of his dreams, she would have multiple vaginas and sets of legs and no face, in some cases a mouth. It was playful and joke-y. I used my own voice and made it sound like a porn soundtrack. It was done with early digital animation. One of the very first iterations of Flash was used, as it had just been released.

My new work, the *Glass Ceiling* series, was inspired again by my personal feelings as a career woman, now in my mid 40s. It had never even occurred to me that sexism would interfere with my goals. One simply needs to study the statistics and look at the way women are portrayed in our culture to realize it. And it's not hard to see that the top blue-chip artists are all men, that a man's output is more valued in our culture.

GT: The male gaze is a very physical presence in our society, from the naked, sexualized women in the magazines that line our grocery stores to the female celebrities that are made more famous because of their sex tapes. The glass ceiling, though, is something invisible and has largely unrecognized consequences. What effect do you hope to produce by combining the overly visible male gaze with the unseen glass ceiling?

JG: The *Glass Ceiling* series shows women as pathetic flailing objects. I love to make beautiful images that seduce and somewhat repulse or at least disturb concurrently.



Jill Greenberg, GC2-445, 2010, archival inkjet prints, dimensions variable. Copyright Jill Greenberg, courtesy Hagedorn Foundation Gallery, Atlanta.

GT: The water in these pictures represents the glass ceiling by somewhat controlling the women's movement in the water and decapitating them. How can showing the effects of the glass ceiling in this way change patriarchal attitudes in society? What else needs to happen beyond making its effect more evident?

JG: In the most simplistic way, I feel that, by calling the series *Glass Ceiling*, it refocuses the discussion on the concept of this limitation. Again, I try to make compelling images that draw in the viewer and hopefully encourage thought.

GT: The images concentrate on the women's sexualized bodies while denying them a head, signifying how the male gaze focuses only on a woman's sexual aspects and rejects female intellect. Which of these ways of objectifying a woman seems more threatening to you?

JG: I suppose rejecting the intellect, since we are sexual creatures. But denying intellect and therefore agency to a woman is worse.

It's impossible to make an image of a woman, or of anyone, without objectifying them. That is the great paradox of imaging the figure. One cannot represent it without therefore placing it in a position of weakness and victimization. I pushed the power of the gaze in this series. Of course, there is room to push it further, but that might look nasty (as in my *Female Object* work).

Photographs from Jill Greenberg's two series, Glass Ceiling and Horse, are on view at Hagedorn Foundation Gallery through December 30, 2011.
