

## Dawn Mellor's celebrity stalker show comes to Frieze art fair

The artist's recasting of film stars as zombies and blood-spattered killers pokes fun at our grim fascination with celebrity culture



Jessica Lack  
guardian.co.uk, Wednesday 14 October 2009 17:39 BST



'If anything, I'm satirising us' ... Dawn Mellor's portrait of Kristin Scott Thomas (2009).  
Photograph: Team Gallery

"I've been a stalker, a sexual pervert and a delusional lover," says the artist Dawn Mellor. "Now I'm a satirical, self-mocking lesbian Don Juan with a string of broken relationships behind me."

### Dawn Mellor

#### Vile Affections

Frieze art fair 2009,

London

Until 18 October

[Link to venue](#)

We are in a windowless south London studio, and I am beginning to wonder if I'm stuck here with a bunny-boiler. But the self-mocking lesbian turns out to be fictional – one of many alter egos that the artist imagines when painting pictures of celebrities. On the walls around us are a series of oil portraits of famous screen actors, all of whom appear to be wretchedly miserable. Mellor devises characters for herself in order to understand the allure of celebrity culture. It can, she says, be exhausting. I'm not surprised.

Although Mellor is known for depicting famous people, unlike [her contemporary Elizabeth Peyton](#) her paintings do not speak of the mysticism and romance of stardom. Her celebrities are not quixotic figures, but the personification of our basest emotions. They are grotesque parodies: sallow, deformed and cruel. Over the years, she has painted Britney Spears as a bald-headed, Charles Manson-ish psycho, Judy Garland as a pill-vomiting virgin, and Julianne Moore as a bloodshot zombie with teeth to rival Shane MacGowan's. Perhaps my favourite is her cockroach-riddled Karl Lagerfeld, a man surely more artificially preserved than Robinson's jam.

Yet, surprisingly for someone who works like a fan-crazed teenager, celebrities themselves hold little fascination for Mellor. "It's the nasty, bitter anti-celebrity bloggers that interest me," she says quietly. I'm guessing she is alluding to notorious snarkers like Perez Hilton and Holy Moly. "My art is about imagining the kind of person who would make those horrible personal attacks on people." And we shouldn't assume that her paintings are satirising celebrities, she says. "If anything, I'm satirising us – particularly those paranoid people who think there's a kind of organised media conspiracy. It amuses me when people think the paintings depict my own, personal feelings."

Mellors's new series of onscreen movie stars is something of a departure from the norm. For a start, she is painting actors in films, not celebrities papped in Heat magazine. Her women are playing a part, hinting at a game being played between artist and subject. Against one wall in the studio leans a full-length portrait of a dishevelled, maniacally leering Gena Rowlands from her spine-chilling appearance in *A Woman Under the Influence*. Next to it is Glenn Close dressed in 18th-century costume, sporting a red-raw hand slap on the cheek; also Jodie Foster, with her librarian's haircut and comfy cardigan, chopping up body parts. It's this picture I find most disturbing, I say: she looks a bit mumsy. Mellor isn't persuaded. "Really? I don't know why, but I always think of Jodie Foster as a butch maths teacher."

The series draws inspiration from slash fiction, an intriguing type of fan fiction written on the web that takes the main characters of films and novels and recasts them as gay – even Harry Potter, she says. "There is a huge amount of fan fiction where the male leads are reappropriated as gay. The stories tend to be pretty sexy. There's also something called femslash, where women take female characters and create love stories about them." Mellor sees desire as a productive force, indeed as a more positive, empowering one than the caustic ravings of bloggers.

One thing is for certain: Mellor doesn't see celebrity culture going away. "It's so linked to capitalism that I don't see an end any time soon," she laughs. "Unless, as a form of disruptive action, all the people who've been rejected from the X Factor invade the offices of corporations en masse, singing I Believe I Can Fly." For a moment I wonder if she's on to something. But she emails me later with a vision that feels more depressing – though perhaps more accurate: "I think celebrity concentration camp is the next low we can realistically expect," she writes. "Televised, of course."