

Art in America

Dawn Mellor at Team

With a comic bitchiness that would shame Joan Rivers, British artist Dawn Mellor skewers female celebrities in the 14 drawings and six oil paintings that constituted her first New York

solo show. Jennifer Lopez and her ilk are meted a full dose of feminist vitriol, though with the complicating factors of tabloid ogling and—can it be?—empathy for those who endure celebrity.

The canvases approach life-size, bringing her subjects into disconcerting proximity to the viewer. Liz Taylor is put forward as the mother of all tabloid divas-cum-victims. Against a blue background speckled with snowflakes, five young Lizs have banded together to fend off the world. One Liz seems to have a full head of hair growing from her face, the red yarn from her sweater tangled around the neck and arms of another Liz sitting below her. The group is surmounted by a Liz reminiscent of her brazen Burton era, as she flips off an unseen accoster.

In other works, Nicole Kidman is replicated to form a trio locked into mutual admiration. Britney Spears gets mythic treatment as Eve, her nudity as guarded as the performer's vaunted virginity by a carefully positioned tangle of hideous uprooted vegetation. J-Lo is radiantly attired in a pink designer dress, with her hair curled in tendrils. As she puts in yet another star turn at an awards show, things have gone terribly awry: her forced smile belies a strained neck and clenched fists as she endures a barrage of debris that may be mud or, perhaps, feces.

The drawings tend to bring the women together in perverse collusion. Jennifer Aniston is caught paying loving homage to J-Lo's famed posterior; Penelope Cruz smilingly offers

her severed breasts to a vision of Kidman; and Anna Nicole Smith binds Courtney Love in forced admiration of Mariah Carey.

Mellor puts a versatile hand at the disposal of an acerbic wit, dexterously scribbling and slathering paint as she transforms famed beauties into media monsters. Yet she also manages to convey her starlets' vulnerability, evoking a modicum of sympathy for the flesh-and-blood women whose lives are constricted by the prisons, however self-imposed, of their public personas. Her true venom seems reserved for the media itself, as she lacerates our obsessions with celebrity.

—Grady T. Turner



Dawn Mellor: *J-Lo*, 2002-03, oil on canvas, 72 by 48 inches; at Team.