

COLETTE  
GALLERY LOK

With a personal symbology comprised of potatoes, high heels, white satin and silk, torn muslin, and brocade, Colette constructs art that is wearable, watchable, inhabitable, and, above all, accessible. Since the mid '70s, she has performed in public spaces as institutional as a museum and as anarchic as the street. In the early '80s, it was not unusual to come upon her *en rituel* in the corner of a nightclub dance floor or front-and-center in a trendy store window. Heavily rouged, her eyes nearly impacted with kohl, her hair piled exuberantly on her head under a touse of trailing tulle, Colette is always easily recognizable—the only woman in the room in punk-formal 18th-century drag.

All of these landmarks of Colette's multidisciplinary career surfaced in her recent exhibition—a veritable salon warehouse of "Colettesized" paintings, products, installations, and fashion statements. Titled "The Rise & Ruins of The House of Olympia," the show became a rococo meeting ground for art, commerce, and erotica. Walking a thin line between self-parody and narcissism, Colette has adopted, one after another, the histrionic personae of famous femmes fatales—Camille, Justine, Mata Hari, and now Olympia. In her foppish paintings and her extravagant "living environments," these identities are transformed into visual malapropisms that provide a sly, if self-serving, commentary on the primacy of the male gaze in the history of Western art. It's nothing new, but in Colette's hands, at least it's amusing.

A glass-fronted, wood cabinet, *Items from the House of Olympia*, 1993, served as a kind of romanticized self-portrait. Chock-full of personal memorabilia ranging from books, records, photographs, and postcards to small collectibles of past performances and lost amours, it embodied a woman who believes salvation lies in the "return of chivalry and good manners."

The paintings in the main room were all new works (1992–93). They weren't very different from the old works. Interrupted reveries after Watteau, Boucher, and Frag-



Colette, *Olympia Makes a Prayer for the Art World* (detail), 1994, mixed media. Installation view.

nard, they were assembled on chaotically punctured foam-core, spray-painted and shot with swaths of gold glitter. Framed with worn brocade or velvet attachments and topped with her signature wigs and veiled hats, they featured modified photographs of a ghostly Colette as a coquettish Olympia. Tiresomely self-reverential, these works only served to underline that the artist's true métier is the *mise-en-scène*.

A glowing manifesto of the House of Olympia, the installation inside the door opened into a littered trail of the artist's life-as-art: painterly tools; a trunkful of rich fabric remnants; a self-portrait with feathered bodice framed by hanging cherubs. The show's centerpiece, a playground of artifice called *Olympia Makes a Prayer for the Art World*, 1994, realized her wish to create "art that matches the furniture." Inhabited by a life-size mannequin dressed in the lacy, bustled folds of Colette's current persona, this group of furnishings, covered in knotted, white parachute-silk, sat before a TV broadcasting a video of the artist decimating her former living space. A beautiful brass tabernacle, a baroque dressing table with a large, satin-draped mirror, a candelabra, and two stuffed crows focused on a gold-potato form, all spoke to a theater of flamboyantly faded elegance, where process is subordinate to product, and identity indistinguishable from its milieu.

—Linda Yablonsky