

Miss July

By Laurie Gunst

My new photographer friend, Patti Levey, has been doing a series of self-portraits she unveiled last Saturday night at a small show of her work. The Unitarian Church in Santa Fe invited her to display the pictures in its foyer; they're overtly in line with the church's liberal politics—engaging the viewer in questions about Islam, women, the female body—but they're also edgy and covertly erotic. The sexier ones weren't on the walls, but instead were discreetly stacked in one of those flip-stands you can page through.

"They asked me to put them somewhere separate," Patti whispers, giving me her rueful, knowing smile. She's a handsome woman, tall and dark-haired, and tonight she's wearing a zany pantsuit, American-flag red with blue-and-white stars. It matches the way she's used the flag in some of her photographs, featuring herself with her strong shoulders bared and the rest of her body wrapped in the flag with just the stripes visible. In others, she is in a full burka, the head-to-toe covering worn by devout Muslim women. I thread my way through the little throng of her Lesbian friends and gravitate to an arresting double self-portrait. Two women—both of them are Patti, but you can't tell the one on the left is her because she's beneath a black burka. On the right, she's gazing out at the viewer with a solemn expression, draped in the American flag. The tapered fingers of both women's hands are visible—they remind me of the ones in Botticelli's dancing Three Graces—except that here, each is holding a stethoscope, taking one another's heartbeat and the measure of their culturally-severed selves.

"Patti, I think I'd like to buy this one," I murmur.

"Really?" She sounds overwhelmed, as if she can't quite believe it. Meanwhile, Patti's seventy-seven-year-old Long Island Jewish mother, Joan (we met just met a few minutes ago) has come back to stand with us as I admire her daughter's work. Rail-thin, Joan has a face like Joan Didion, skin so paper-thin I can see her blue veins and the skull beneath them. She's wearing an espresso-brown suede coat with what looks to be a leopard collar and some unidentifiable fur dangling from her shoulders; an ensemble so Seventh-Avenue high-style, I'm sure it must be real.

When I ask, she exclaims, "Are you kidding?" Her bony hand flies to her bosom in mock horror. "I would **die** before I'd wear real fur!" I decide I'm now officially in love with Patti's mother.

"I'm thrilled you love this one!" Patti has become exultant, knowing I'm sincere about buying the picture. "But go over there and take a look at my secret stash before you make up your mind."

A couple of years ago, when Patti and I first met, I went out to her studio in La Cienega, a half-hour's drive from town. It was my friend Keri who'd introduced us, seeing I was thinking of moving to Santa Fe and wanting to link me up with other interesting women. Patti was already doing this series on Islam; being obsessed with Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo, she was also edging toward the larger subject of prisons, incarceration, and other sundry assaults on the body. The day we met, she had just come back from rooting around in the ghostly ruins of the abandoned prison south of Santa Fe, where there was a riot in 1980 that rivaled Attica in its savagery and fifty-four men were killed.

"Look at this," Patti said to me that day, proffering a torn and tattered relic from her expedition to the prison. It was a Playboy centerfold from what looked like the 1980s. The caption read, "Miss July". The Playmate, a pert blond, had her hair pinned up in a little top-knot of a ponytail, and she was a dead ringer for Olivia Newton-John, John Travolta's co-star in the movie *Grease*. She was kneeling as artlessly as a child, legs tucked under her in that way you can only do when you're either incredibly young, limber as a dancer, or use those blocks in yoga class, like I have to now.

"I'm going to do something with this centerfold," Patti said to me. "Don't know what, but I'll use it somehow in a photograph."

"I don't blame you," I answered. "She's irresistible." To put it mildly. This woman is so lush, with her perfect, small-nippled breasts, that little scrap of white cloth placed strategically across her thigh so you can't see her crotch... suddenly I long for a cock, just so I could fuck her myself.

Tonight, at the opening, when I page through the stack of images the Unitarians have deemed too hot to handle, here she is again. Miss July. Once again, she's presented to the viewer like a trophy, but this time against the backdrop of a billowing black burka; Patti's eyes faintly gleaming behind the burka's mesh screen, holding Miss July. Smitten by this double image and the Playmate's lush beauty, I feel a crazy jolt of absurd self-recognition: two weeks after my sixty-third birthday, I'm reminded of *myself* by Miss July. Why on earth? Do I really think I look like this? Am I crazy? I can't be that deluded! But it's the way she's beckoning the viewer with her sultry gaze, the pride she exhibits in her body, those uptilted breasts... I *am* this woman, somehow, still.

Patti's looking right through me, like she can see how aroused I am by this picture. Straight or gay, it doesn't make much of a difference. "This is even better than the double portrait with the stethoscopes," I babble. "I was drawn to that one because of the medical imagery. You know, I love anything to do with medicine."

"No, I didn't know that," Patti answers. "Want to play doctor?" We bump hips. The little foyer full of happily chattering Lesbians echoes with our laughter.

"This is the one I'm going to get, Patti." I'm totally sure of my choice now. Her mother is still standing beside us. "I'm just curious," Joan says. "Where are you going to hang that?"

“Somewhere intimate,” I answer. “My bathroom. Or the bedroom, where the next man I take to bed can see it, too.”

Yikes, I say to myself, walking out into the starry moon-blue Santa Fe night with Miss July flapping against my thighs in the wind. *So much for aging, for the purported waning of desire.* I think of Hamlet, sneering at his mother’s unabated lust; “the heyday in the blood” he calls Gertrude’s unseemly desire for her husband, Claudius, the usurping king.

The heyday in the blood. When does this die down? I wrote about it in my last letter to the Man on Atalaya—the one I’d met in Santa Fe last summer—after he’d told me in October he was courting someone else. At the time, I was trying to get clear on whether I was coming to Santa Fe to pursue him or if I would come anyway, regardless. Knowing it had to be the latter, that I couldn’t go to New Mexico if I was harboring any impossible dreams, I dug deep into myself until I was clear: Yes, I *did* have other reasons for wanting to leave New York and be in New Mexico. Writing this letter to him—a farewell of sorts, if not to him then at least to any hope of us becoming lovers—I decided to go for broke, to delve into the reasons why I’d pretended, all summer long while he withheld himself from me sexually, that a friendship between us was enough. Why had I lied to myself, and to him, that this would suffice?

*Why did I so distance myself from my own feelings? As an older woman, coming to terms with my desire, and desirability, in a culture that makes such cruel sport of an older woman’s longings, I took my cue from this brutality and held myself aloof. Or I tried to and mocked my own needs. And, you being younger—admittedly not by much, but still—**was** an issue for me. You disavowed that it mattered to you, but I never believed this. I was always insecure: was I beautiful enough? Young enough? But as I look back over all the sweet-and-sexy things you wrote and said, I think maybe you, too, were trying to discover what it was you really wanted. And maybe you wondered if it might be me. Age aside, somehow, now, I honestly think you did find me desirable.*

It was shame that filled me, I realized, all summer long—shame being the sharper edge of the knife we call embarrassment. I was humiliated by the thought of being “the older woman”—the hag? The crone?—still filled with unruly desire. So, I stomped it down, pretended not to want this man in bed. Better that than to appear ridiculous, make myself vulnerable to all the savage mockery of older women that our culture flings forth.

Yet, now, from the vantage point of only a few more months, I must suppose something has shifted within me, some planet has made its transit across my inner sky. How else could I have summoned the self-love, the self-assurance to invite this man and his new girlfriend to my birthday party? Why else would I have snatched that erotic reverie of a photograph from the stack at Patti’s opening and walked away with it, to take it home and hang it on my wall and see some side of my abiding, still-gloried female self in that centerfold of Miss July?

This morning, I put on my bathing suit and stand before the cheap full-length mirror hanging on the back of my closet door. I start with the bathing suit on instead of naked

because I'm so cock-sure of how good I will look that I'm thinking maybe I'll venture up to Ten Thousand Waves—Santa Fe's nonpareil Japanese-themed spa—and brave the communal hot tub, the one for both women and men.

Well, the bad news is: I do **not** resemble Miss July. What confronts me in the mirror is so shocking, so demoralizing I hear myself whimper like a wounded animal. "Oh!" I cry. "This can't be me."

But it is. A glutton for punishment, I slither out of the bathing suit. Might as well take this straight-up. And, let me tell you: the depth of the sadness I feel goes way beyond Nora Ephron's chatty little ditty, *I Feel Bad About My Neck*. I feel bad about *everything*. I want to lie down and die. Right here, right now, in this merciless Santa Fe early-morning sunlight, even though just yesterday I set up a brand-new email account with a jaunty moniker, santafelaurie@gmail.com, so I could start Internet dating. *My God*, I say to myself now, to this tragic remnant of my former self staring back at me with such insouciance, such innocence; it doesn't care that it is causing me utter desolation, that I believe this body has gone and betrayed me in a way I do not deserve. How could you, body? How could you do this to me? I think about my brave, hopeful little bio I'm about to write for RightStuff, the dating service for graduates of the Ivy League. *Are you kidding? Who would want this?*

The inside of my upper arms is sagging. No matter my rituals of self-care, my three-days-a-week-at-the-gym for the past fifteen years. No: I am Hamlet (again) this morning, lifting poor Yorick's skull from the grave and pointing it toward Ophelia's turret. "Fly to my lady's chamber and tell her, *though she paint an inch thick*, she must come to this." That's a reference to the white-lead face paint Elizabethan women used: the lead, of course, was deadly.

My eyes dart, despite themselves, back to this mirror. I note the sheath of strong muscle that curves along my upper arm, and I bless the free weights for that. The welcome sight of my breasts, still wondrous in their plumpness, their righteous citing on my chest, prompts me to think of two things. The first is my most recent mammogram, the technician letting out a long low whistle and showing me the plate: a pear-shaped, translucent curve with a startling band of pure white beneath it. "That's your pectoral muscle," she says. "Lift weights much?" I answer yes and am proud of my devotion to the cause. The second thing is seeing my mother's breasts on her deathbed, when in her agitation she kept lifting her nightgown to lay herself bare. Modesty mattered not at all by then. And her breasts were still lovely, tiny and firm, even after nursing me and my three siblings. My sister Mary, there with me at the bedside, remembered the line from a poem by our friend Charles Simic, about a man who asks on his deathbed to see his wife's breasts one last time.

Eyes traveling on down to my torso—my "core," as personal trainers call it nowadays—I get a brief reprieve: I still have a waist; my belly and hips are holding strong. But at the sight of my legs, my eyeballs try to dart away. I force them not to. Oh, my legs! My once-glorious pins, the envy of every woman in my family, and many others, too: my splendid, striding, runner's, athlete's, Kilimanjaro-climber's legs are, like my arms, much changed. The winter-pale skin of my inner thighs resembles those gauzy Austrian curtains you see in the windows

of some Fifth Avenue apartments, hanging in silken semi-circles. Oh, I can see the strength of the muscles here, but that's no consolation. My skin's a traitor: all those years of slathering rich creams and lotions over every inch of my body, worthless. I tuck the fingers of one hand into the fold where my leg meets my crotch, lift the skin there just enough to smooth the wrinkles out. I'd give anything for my legs still to be this taut.

I turn sideways and the view gets even worse. All those butt exercises: the arabesques for balance, with five-pound weights Velcroed tight around my ankles? The donkey-kicks and sideways leg lifts, so excruciating yet oddly pleasurable, too? Forget about it. The skin on my buttocks wrinkles like a toad's.

I turn my back on the mirror, limp to the bedroom, toss my bathing suit back in the drawer. I think of what my writer friend, Cristina Garcia, says about post-midlife sex: "Lighting is everything." But Cristina is Cuban, and I feel like she shares the wondrous unbridled self-esteem of her Cuban male protagonists, so adored as little boys by their doting mamis that even when they're decrepit with age, they still think every woman in the world is dying for a taste of them. Why can't I be like that?

I know there'll be many a woman—and maybe even a few men—who find my lamentations ridiculous, or offensive, and ungrateful in the extreme. *What's the big deal? Do you know how lucky you are, you narcissistic bitch?* To have your breasts at all; to not have scars lashing their fierce tracks across your flesh? You'd be right, of course, and I know this. I *am* grateful. I *do* know that to grow old is a privilege in itself; I have many a friend who never got the chance. So, we age; our muscles soften, tissues sag, skin begins to resemble dry arroyos. Why should any of this matter, and so savagely, at that?

My grandmother Alice used to say that getting old and losing your looks wasn't so bad, "unless you were a beauty to begin with." Whenever I'd hear her say this, I'd run to the bathroom mirror and offer up a short prayer to the female gods for being merely pretty, a nice-enough-looking girl, but certainly no raving beauty. This began to feel less like a lack and more like a reprieve: when the time came, I wouldn't grieve for what I'd never had.

Now, with all my talk of appearances, all this wretched-excess emphasis on the exterior instead of the true, Platonic Form that lies within...it may come as a surprise that I am one of the most fiery, unapologetic, hard-core, badass feminists you may ever meet. That said, you might expect I'd have an aversion to the very thought of plastic surgery, and you'd be right. So, when my otherwise equally hard-ass feminist friend Vicki, who has only a couple of years on me, says she's saving up for her eyes and neck to be done, I go a little crazy over what seems to me like her treachery. And Vicki, undismayed, invariably shoots back, "That's easy for you to say. You don't need it yet."

"Need?" I shriek. "*Yet?* Do you hear the judgment implicit in those two words? Listen to yourself, Vicki! What you're saying is that I don't 'need' it now, but invariably, one of these days, I will."

“Yeah, okay,” Vicki mutters, folding her long thin arms resolutely across her chest. She’s drawn her line in the sand and she knows it: I’m staking out the higher ground and she’s Dolly Parton, but so what? I won’t even talk about what happened between my older sister and me this past Thanksgiving in LA, after she’d just had a Botox injection, her eyebrows were zinging upward like Catwoman, and I completely freaked out because I, again, felt utterly betrayed. My older sister, my beacon through the dark plain of aging, had let me down.

So, you may wonder: how do I square my political convictions, my steadfast refusal to even contemplate plastic surgery, with this morning’s inexplicable descent into bathos at the sight of my drooping thighs? All I can say by way of an answer is I’m astonished by myself as well. Because in the face of all the evidence, all the furtive glances I’ve taken at the bodies of elderly women in the locker rooms of my life—I never believed I’d ever look like that. I never thought time would touch me as it has touched them.

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