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Honig's art takes flight with 'Widow'

Artist teams with publisher to produce a tour de force single-issue magazine

By ALICE THORSON
The Kansas City Star

As an artist, personality and entrepreneur, Peregrine Honig is a high-profile figure in Kansas City. Through exhibits and collections, she also has made her mark in Chicago; New York; Santa Fe, N.M.; and Los Angeles.

Although best known for her delicate watercolors of teenage and prepubescent girls, Honig, a Kansas City Art Institute alum and 2000 Charlotte Street Foundation Award winner, has numerous other projects to her credit.

The latest is "Widow," a consummately creative send-up of a glossy fashion magazine and summary of her career concerns to date.

Over the last decade, she has fulfilled mural and sculpture commissions, starred and participated in many performance art productions, and also enlivened the local art scene as a curator and writer.

But art is not her only arena.

Honig is one of a small band of artist-entrepreneurs who have fueled the development of the Crossroads Arts District by establishing small businesses in the area. Since opening in 2003, her lingerie shop, Birdies, has grown into a six-figure business and established Honig as a key player in the Kansas City fashion world.

Ambition is this 33-year-old's middle name, and when she dreams up a new project, she possesses the skill and powers of persuasion to get backers on board.

Building on a 10-year relationship with Landfall Press, one of the nation's leading fine-art print producers, Honig has recently completed a major project that breaks new ground for both the publisher and the artist.

"They invested in me hugely," she said.

Released in recent weeks, the production, titled "Widow," is a limited-edition, glossy, high-fashion magazine that simultaneously plays along with the genre and undercuts its consumerist and misogynist underpinnings at every turn.

Landfall, based in Santa Fe, is billing it as a "unique venture," one that has "never been done before by any fine art publisher." For Honig, it's a tour de force, at once seductive and subversive, and a fitting projection of her dual involvement in feminist critique and the commerce and comeliness of fashion.

The title, a sly reference to "Women's Wear Daily," is meant to call attention to a phase of life that fashion magazines ignore, Honig said, and also alludes to the fashion requirements of widowhood in many cultures. The single-volume project grew out of an idea for a print series after Landfall founder Jack Lemon responded positively to Honig's series of watercolors critiquing the fashion industry.

In a recent e-mail, Lemon said he was initially thinking about a fashion-related handcrafted book but then thought, "Why reference a fashion magazine when we can make a real fashion magazine?"

"I contacted Peregrine and put her in touch with Landfall's graphic designer, Bob Feie," Lemon said.

In May 2008, Lemon, Honig, Feie and one of Landfall's printers, Steve Campbell, met at a Hyatt in Chicago and hammered out the details of the project.

At that point, Honig said, "I started to think about it as a large-scale curatorial project."

The magazine is a fascinating compendium, featuring color illustrations of Honig's signature watercolors of young girls interspersed with lushly photographed narrative scenarios in which the elaborately costumed artist plays the "celebrity" star.

"'Widow' provides an extraordinary forum for Peregrine's ideas and work," said Bruce Hartman, director of the Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art.

"I think it's a huge step for her and a milestone in terms of a multiple work by a Kansas City artist," Hartman added. "It goes beyond the traditional single-image print into this much expanded context. It's all contained in this format of a glossy, fashion-derived publication."

"Widow" presents the artist's powers of cultural analysis on steroids, riding roughshod over celebrity culture, fashion and consumerism, the skewed values they embody and the destructive messages they send to women and girls.

The cover features a glam-shot of Honig in perfect fashion-model makeup attired in a sequined silver dress accessorized with feathers, fur and jewels.

Yet the tethered hummingbirds that accompany her hint that something else may be going on.

"In 'Widow,' everything that we once knew as consumable and comfortable becomes uneasy and, at times, dangerous," Chicago-based art writer Alicia Eler observes in one of the volume's two introductory essays.

Honig's watercolors expose how women's conceptions of themselves are steered by forces that have nothing to do with their well-being and everything to do with making money and exerting psychological and sexual control.

Stuffed animals become surrogates for soul-less, tabloid-style competitions and speculations based on our culture's obsession with female body image.

In works like "Herpes for Chanel" and "Crack Whore for Dior," she upends the fashion industry's impossible ideals.

"I wanted to send people down the runway that designers would steer clear of," she said.

The photo essays, including two based on poems penned by Honig, offer lavish visualizations of female fantasies, from the classic fairy princess astride a white horse, to gothic visions of deliverance from oppressive relationships.

In addition to her own work, "Widow" includes contributions from many artists Honig admires, including painters, photographers and designers such as Peggy Noland, who created a special reading glove that allows viewers to peruse -- and protect-- the pages with style.

There's a CD attached to the inside back cover, featuring the final studio recording of Jimmy Carl Black, the drummer from Captain Beefheart and Frank Zappa and the Mothers of Invention.

"I helped produce the recorded stories of this amazing old American Indian drummer," Honig said.

"Jimmy died several months after the recording was finished. The ('Widow') cover was so girly, and I wanted the end to have a masculine sentimentality."

The production values of "Widow" are stellar, reflecting the best efforts of Chicago-based designer Bob Feie and photographers including E.G. Schempf and Ron Berg.

"It was a way for me to compile some of my favorite artists into something I thought would be conceptually sound," Honig said.

And sound it is, sweeping in scope, yet with a laser focus on the absurdity of consumer culture's expectations and ideals regarding women.

"Widow" is a milestone, but it's probably not Honig's last word on the subject.

The topic is inexhaustible, but then, so is she.

'WIDOW'

The work was published in an edition of 1,500 by Landfall Press in Santa Fe, N.M.; 505-982-6625; www.landfallpress.com.

The deluxe edition, which includes Peggy Noland's reading glove, is priced at \$700. The regular edition costs \$600.

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