

## 'Rebel Without a Cock'

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At the centre of Kembra Pfahler's *Rebel Without a Cock* is a glittering, head-high phallus made in collaboration with Urs Fischer and Spencer Sweeney. The floor is painted in Pfahler's signature "Tile Red" (which also adorns every surface of her New York apartment) and the surrounding walls are adorned with a series of prints styled after Playboy cartoonist LeRoy Neiman's Femlin characters, first created as a visual accompaniment to the magazine's "Party Jokes" column.

These are icons of the pornographic excess and sleazy glamour mass-produced in post-war America, as well as the sexual counterculture that blossomed in 1970s New York, but the appeal of these references for Pfahler is also that she can make them mean what she wants or even leave them playfully meaningless. "The character in this Femlin series is me as I've been since the early eighties," she bluntly insists in the exhibition catalogue. Pfahler is not stepping outside of herself to enact an alter-ego, nor is she straightforwardly mocking the markers of male fantasy. The works displayed here are as much expressions of her own aesthetic universe as they are performance props. She is playing dress-up, but not make-believe.

Pfahler grew up in North Hollywood with a pro-surfer father before moving to New York City in 1979 to study art. On arrival, she began to stage performances on a near weekly basis on the Lower East Side circuit – covering her body in house-paint and hanging upside down on crosses – and started the death-punk metal band *The Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black*. Since then, she has lived her life as a radical experiment in creativity and open-ended collaboration, following a dual philosophy of availability – using whatever materials come to hand – and anti-naturalism – the pursuit of an aesthetic of total artificiality. In Pfahler's world, everything is fair game for artistic manipulation. In 1992, she had her vagina sewn shut for Richard Kern's *Sewing Circle*.

As much as Pfahler's practice is rooted in this legendary history of downtown New York, it is also an articulation of a singular, synthetic vision. When asked to explain why she does what she does, Pfahler often gives the simple response that she is expressing her DIY interpretation of beauty. This is the kind of beauty that is found not in an airbrushed Playboy editorial, but in the crudely drawn, hypersexualised pixie lurking a few pages on in a jokes column. Both of these versions of pornographic beauty are fabricated, but the latter delights in the fact. If the erotic appeal of a smoothed-over full-page Playboy spread is that it is somehow realer than life, the pull of the Femlin is that it could never be anything other than made-up.

Pfahler's restaging of the Femlin illustrations pulls them even further away from reality. Her own aesthetic codes – body paint, big hair, brick-red settings – are brought into play, and elaborate stage lighting heightens the aesthetic of unnatural amateurism. There is also a comic absurdity to the experience of looking through the images, a fact viewers are reminded of every time the shimmering *Disco Cock* flickers into their peripheral vision.

It's easy to explain away Pfahler's work as an exercise in shock and transgression, but the real pleasure of her work is in the tension and ambiguity. The weird thing about desire – which is also the queer thing and the utopian thing – is that we can want something without knowing why, or even what it is. Pfahler knows this. Here, the meaningless excitement of sex is a way of ushering the unknown into existence, of entertaining the impossibility of another world.

