Julie Heffernan
at P.P.O.W.

If contemporary art criticism still invented labels for movements, Julie Heffernan’s gorgeously executed, old-masterish self-portraits might be part of something called Neo-Decadent Baroque. The obsessions of both the Decadent Style and Baroque art, their fervent blend of Christianity and paganism, and their celebration of fertility, are here revived with a self-conscious artificiality that never quite lapses into surrealism. Heffernan manages to avoid the pitfalls of irony, camp or conservatism in strange, sometimes shocking, but always lucid hosannas to a kind of spiritualized femininity.

In a number of the 11 oils on canvas in this exhibition (all but one 2003), Heffernan continues to depict her naked self staring impassively at the viewer, as a riot of flowers, fruit and other colorful objects surround her hips or spill out of her body. In Self Portrait as Stone Woman, the artist bearing, as always, the aristocratic pallor of Northern Renaissance portraits discharges a tutulike profusion of baubles and gems. She stands beneath a milky, translucent shower, à la Danaë. Elsewhere, heightening the sense of fecundity, Heffernan places her figures in scenes of rampant vegetation – a hothouse jungle (Self Portrait as a Rare Breed) or a dense copse (Self Portrait as Tiny Eruption).

In the language of decadence, unchecked growth leads to the grotesque. In Self Portrait as Thing in the Forest III, the artist creates a two-headed image of herself dressed in a tent-shaped hoop skirt. An oversize salamander creeps about her feet. Fire-in coronas, pillars or volcanic conflagrations- appears often, adding the feeling of nature about to run amok. In Self Portrait in the Bedroom (2002), a hermaphroditic Heffernan, her head haloed by fire, appears in an interior on a giant bed. In turn, she looms over a miniature landscape nestled in the coverlet. Heffernan’s mastery of 17th-century mannerisms and her taste for inexplicable allegory come to the fore in such works as Self Portrait as Wunder Kabinet and Everything That Rises. In the first, aristocratic women in flowing gowns gather in the ballroom of a Versaille-like palace, its walls hung with miniatures of Heffernan’s own works. A coruscating stream of gems cascades from an ornate chandelier above, surrounded by birds. In the second, birds flutter around another, rather sensuous-looking, chandelier; flaming filaments swirl between it and the meticulously frescoed, Baroque-style ceiling. In both these highly detailed works, it is as if we are privy to a parallel world, filled with ecstasy and awe, where women’s psyches might catch fire at the touch of some alien god.

-Steven Vincent