

by Joe Dolce

# CLOSET PAINTER

## Hedy Klineman Ransacks Her Clients' Closets for a Tie, Bra Or Whatever & Turns It Into a 'Fashion Portrait'

**B**eware of opening your closet doors when painter Hedy Klineman is around. If she spots something she likes, your wardrobe will never be the same. She'll hound you until she gets the coat, hat, bra or scarf she wants, then she'll paint over it, paste it on canvas, and whip it into what she calls a "fashion portrait." So far, she has burrowed deep into the closets of Keith Haring, Andy Warhol, Henry Geldzahler and, of course her own. She will soon be showing the results of her raids at the Ruth Vered Gallery in East Hampton. **Hamptons Newspaper/Magazine: Let's start from the beginning...**

Hedy Klineman: I've always had fun creating things. When I was younger, my mother sent me to a progressive experimental day school in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. We were taught how to create our own dances, to put together our own theatrical productions. Our parents worked during the war, it became an after-school thing, and all the kids stayed until well into their teens.

In high school, my art teacher seemed to think I had some talent and she helped me take extra classes in New York. I did design work and textiles.

**HNM: No background in fashion?**

HK: A bit later, at the same time I was going to Cooper Union I had to earn a living. I got a job as a fashion coordinator and I was fortunate enough to start in a very high position. I was seeing Norman Norell's clothes in the late '50s, as well as seeing Grace Kelly at Oleg Cassini's openings.

Later on, I worked for Jourdan's. I started their American division from scratch from one little room in the Empire State building and worked for them for 10 years. I was the president of the American division. I also did their advertising. I got them into trouble, sort of.

**HNM: How?**

HK: At that time, I was very interested in surrealism and I wanted to do a campaign in the surrealistic way. We did a mermaid washed up on the shore, only the top was fish and the bottom was real and she had these beautiful legs and she was wearing Charles Jourdan shoes. It was peculiar...

The following season, I did one—and now when I think of it, it makes me cringe because there's been so much violence and I abhor guns and violence—but I had a woman in a beautiful room with velvet and gold, one of those Helmut Newton hotel rooms, sitting in a gold chair with a large bag over her. You only saw her legs and thighs, and she's tied up. That got everybody upset. I thought they were beautiful images.

**HNM: When did you officially start painting?**

HK: I worked with them until my second child was born. Then I said, 'I've had fun. I've traveled, I've conquered, but I haven't painted.' My husband was supportive and I opened up a studio.

Now I'm on 20th between Park and Broadway in the same building with Julian Schnabel, Les Levine, a lot of artists. I live on 93rd and Park. I'm sort of an uptown/downtown girl.

**HNM: How did these fashion portraits**



**evolve?**

HK: I've always loved texture and have always been interested in the surface of things. My work in the '70s got thick and heavy. Finally, I said, why don't I paint something other than canvas? I had these damask tablecloths so I stretched them and started on them and they became hangings. One day, I saw my St. Laurent scarf sitting in my studio and said, 'This is so gorgeous. I

want to paint on it.' It was an inspiration. The next day, I did another. Between 1980 and 1981, I took all my treasures out of the closet—my Pucci dresses, Courreges suits I had made in Paris.

**HNM: You didn't want to start on the stuff from Woolworth?**

HK: Ugh, no. The more beautiful the treasures, the stronger the memories. And they were hidden things I didn't wear any-

more anyway. In the beginning, I had a show at my studio and there was all this controversy about it.

**HNM: Controversy?**

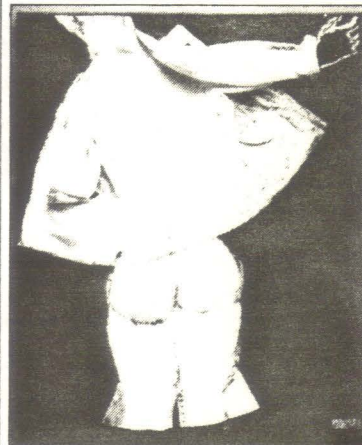
HK: Some people said it was violent. They were appalled.

**HNM: What's the cost of a portrait?**

HK: Between \$2000 and \$5000.

**HNM: No designer has ever sued you for appropriating his stuff.**

HK: No. I checked into it. My husband is a lawyer. I bought it, so it's mine.



Artist Hedy Klineman has created "portraits" from the clothes of many influential New Yorkers—including her own Thierry Mugler suit (above). Now, she has aspirations to take her art to the Oval Office and its current occupants.

**HNM: Whose closets have you raided?**

HK: It's a record of the '80s, of the art community, writers, artists from Julian Schnabel, Dianne Brill, Keith Haring, Mario Buatta, to Mary McFadden to Mayor Ed Koch. His was unusual in that I was asked to do Night of 100 Trees. I got 100 antique ties donated from the Antique Boutique then I painted on them. There were a lot of celebrities doing the other trees. Robin Leach, Trump, Peter Allen and Koch. I painted on his and the others as well. I did a tree dripping with ties.

The bottom line was that Pat Lawford Kennedy wound up buying my tree and giving the ties to other people for Christmas.

**HNM: Do you ask people to do their portraits or do they ask you?**

HK: It works both ways. Sometimes I go into their closets. Other times they give me things. With (photographer) Marcus Leath-erdale, I wanted his leather jacket and the sleeveless jeans vest he wears over it. It took me five years to get it. On the other hand, Anita Sarko threw her house at me. I told her I wanted everything she wore in a day. And you know her, with the elaborate clothes, makeup, hats, scarves, tapes and records. And Mario Buatta, the chintz king. He's very popular with the Chessies and the da-da crowd. He doesn't take himself seriously. He gave me his fabric, and a Brooks Brothers shirt.

**HNM: Whose closet has been the most interesting?**

HK: I would have to say mine was among

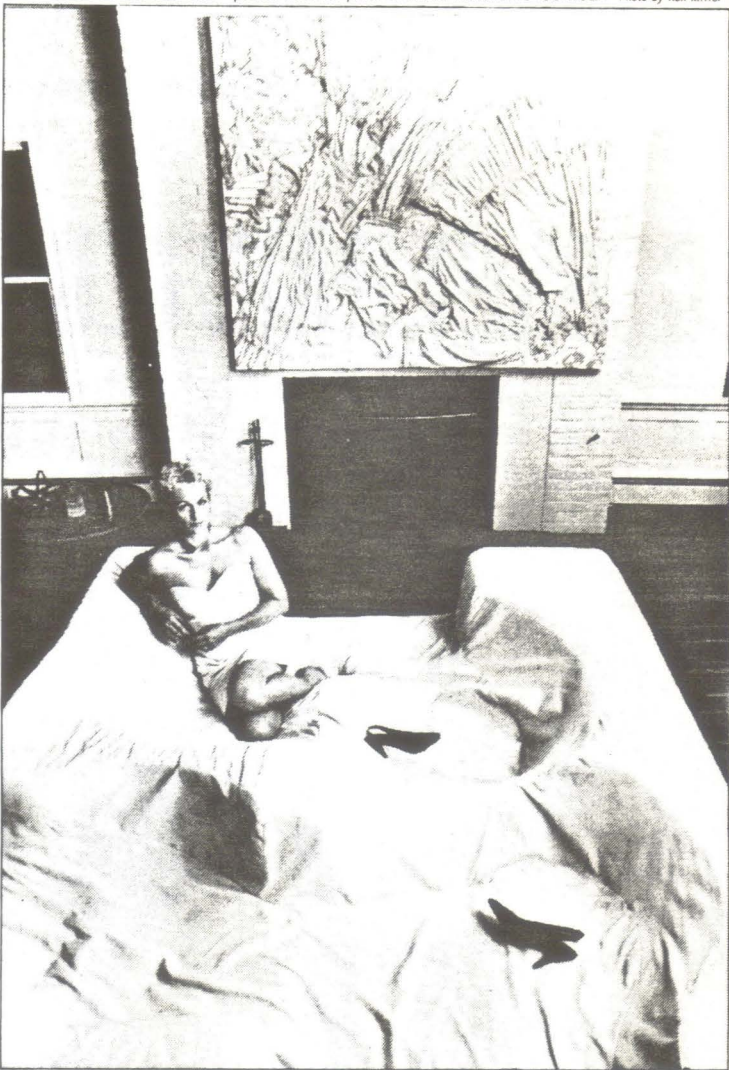
Photo by Rex Miller

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# Klineman

Hedy Klineman has done more than one self-portrait—here she poses with her painted set of Victorian underwear. Photo by Rex Miller



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them. I have a purple Claude Montana leather coat, a bright yellow Castalbajac that looks like an over-size shirt. So what I'm saying, I appreciate the beauty in clothing. Jane Holzer has a fabulous closet and I'm going to do Bianca Jagger. First I thought I'd like something Halston and do her '70s. Now I think it might be fun to do her Calvin Klein in the '80s.

The new thing I want to do is couples. I did a portrait of McDermott and McGough, the painters who wear that 18th-century clothing. I want to do Calvin and Kelly [Klein], the Hererras. I haven't spoken to them about it. And before it gets too late, I'd like to do the president and Nancy. It'd be great to have his plaid shirt and riding hat.

**HNM: Have you asked?**

HK: No. Eventually, I think I'll wind up doing them. It's so much fun for the participants, too. Sadly enough, I've done friends who've died. Warhol, Willi Smith. But the spirit of the people inhabit their clothes.

I'm also doing a series on the black photographer, James van Der Zee. He died four years ago at 94. He photographed Harlem, and when he was 90, he married Donna, who was 30. The thing that propelled him was a show he did at the Met called "Harlem On My Mind." I think it was the first time photos were shown in a museum and given the prestige of art. When he died, his wife, rather than giving the clothes to the Smithsonian, offered some to me. She gave me some ties, many of them already knotted—he just threw them over his neck—and they were stained. She also gave me things from his studio, like the metal plate you slide into

those large format cameras. It's the first time the person I'm doing a portrait of isn't around to see it.

**HNM: Do people generally like their portraits?**

HK: Everyone I've done so far has like them. To me, that's most important. In my last show I did Henry Geldzahler and he gave me one of his Panama hats. When he saw it, he said, 'Hedy, I really like it and I'm so relieved.'

**HNM: Do you ever do regular non-celebrity people? Just plain folks?**

HK: I was told by the curator at the Guggenheim that the work documents history. With celebrities, it also documents who was in the public eye at the time.

But I want to do an everyman series: the butcher, the housekeeper, the hardware store man, the doorman. They're lesser known people, but they're known by me. That's what makes it a portrait, I know the people.

**HNM: Do you always know what piece of clothing you want?**

HK: Sometimes I see them right away; with others it's a drag. The other thing is that the clothes are so much like the people. The way they materialize is so much like the person. It's spooky. We inhabit our clothes. So I usually look for something that people don't want to give up.

I'm doing Randy Schindler. Guess what I'm asking him for.

**HNM: His wallet?**

HK: A bottle or two of the best stuff he drinks. With lots of nude ladies.

I never expected this would go on like this for six years. I always say, I save the best for last.

**HNM: It's not over yet.**