
By GRACE GLUECK

"Women: A Changing Picture" (Graham, 1014 Madison Avenue, at 78th Street): Rooting through its considerable stock, the Graham Gallery has come up with a tame but not uninteresting summer theme show: women as seen by American artists — mostly male — from the mid-19th century to now. Starting with a graceful, ever-so-proper "Mother and Child" by Thomas Sully (1783-1872), the group of 20-odd paintings winds up with the brash yellow fantasy nude of Carmen Cicero's "Golden Dreams" of 1982.

Over the years, the view changes — the shy, head-hanging lass of William Morris Hunt's "Greek Girl" (1851) gives way to the still demure but far sexier clotheshorse of John White Alexander's "Green Bow" (1898), and by 1932 we have the relaxed, recumbent pose and insouciant gaze of Guy Pène du Bois's "Mura Dehn in Dance Costume." A haunting, angst-ridden self-portrait by Helen Torr (1886-1967) brings us deep into the 20th century.

Other works to pause at are Paul Resika's high-key "Nude and Blue Pond" (1981), "Pond Lilies," a turn-of-the-century essay in melancholy by the American Impressionist Robert Reid, and Thomas Anshutz's "Woman in Interior Reading," a small but intense picture aglow with firelight. All in all, not bad for a show pulled from the racks. (Through Aug. 31.)

Carmen Cicero (Graham Modern Gallery, 1014 Madison Avenue, at 78th Street): Carmen Cicero is another inspiration, although not specifically for feminists and especially not in his "Battle of the Sexes II." In this, the contestants are evenly matched, with the male protagonist capering center stage as a cowboy, accompanied by what may be his alter ego in riding breeches. His pink antagonist is acting very accessible in a garter belt, but she, too, seems to have an alternate, who is green.

The inspiration Cicero offers is in his recovery from a fire in 1971 that took what was then his life's work. Indeed, he seems to have been purged by the experience. Having previously been an Expressionist suspended between abstraction and figuration, he is now an entirely figurative Expressionist, albeit with tinges of Dubuffet. Most of his subjects are male stereotypes — a pilot with a style like Snoopy's Red Baron, gangster types and good-time Charlies as well as cowboys — most of whom have cigars, cigarettes and pipes clamped between their teeth. Balancing them, though, is one man who apparently is caught on an ice floe under the title "Nightmare" and another painted as if he were a rock yearning across a stretch of water for a rock-female.

It may or may not be significant that much of the action in these paintings takes place under romantic moonlit skies. Cicero is an accomplished draftsman. But in his oils, he goes to dramatic lengths to deform most of the figures (less so in the more decorative watercolors) while retaining his competence as a painter and, in some wood cutouts, as a sculptor. As a man, however, he seems to be taking refuge in jocular ambivalence. But that being the fashion of the time, why shouldn't he? (Through Saturday.)