

You've seen her everywhere, and sometimes in her wide eyes, you've seen yourself. *Fickle. Pussy. Good girl. Want.* Your self as others see her. *Delicate. Cow. Simple. Nice.* A rose by any other name.

Unless you've caught her late at night, spreading her art with a bucket of wheat-paste alongside a hundred club flyers, you've never seen her. You know the hundreds of words she has for herself, but you don't know her name. You don't know for sure she's a she, since sometimes she's a he. *Dickhead. Deviant. Reliable. Prince Charming.* If you know her as anything, she's the Good Girl.

"I don't know if I'm a good girl or a bad girl. Because I'm both. And if I want to be a really effective person in the world, I have to own both." Since April 1992, Pam Butler has been claiming ownership on city walls and street lamps, postering lower Manhattan with simple drawings of women with perfect lips, flipped-back hairdos, long eyelashes, and a multitude of words. *Can too. Hopeful. Happy. Sensation.* A beacon of clarity amid the cryptographic tags of most graffiti, her Good Girl project has become perhaps the most sighted and cited street art since Keith Haring painted the city with hearts and dogs.

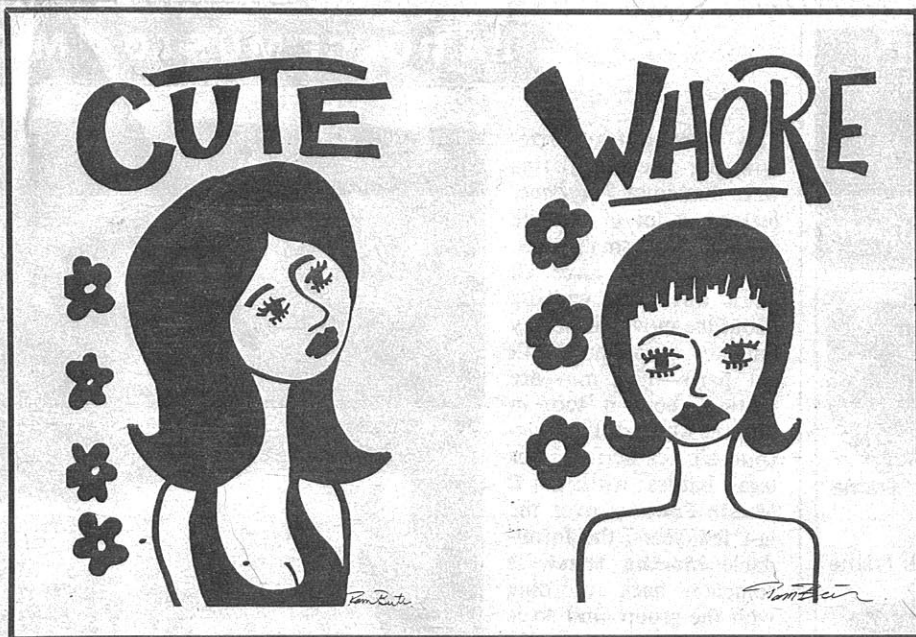
Yet while publicizing their noms de plume is the prime motivation of New York's other most notorious contemporary public artists, Revs and Cost, one of the strengths of Butler's posters is their anonymity, their elision of artistic ego. The way—unsigned—they could be by/about any girl or boy. The way you construct your own meaning from their enigmatic and often contradictory connection of text and image. Butler tells her name to anyone who writes to her at the P.O. box she posts among her artwork, and is willing to be interviewed, but she is wary of defining her project for others. "I wanted an element of, 'Where does this come from?'" she says, sipping tea in the Prince Street apartment that doubles as her studio. "People have talked about the posters in ways that I didn't see them, which has enhanced my understanding of what I'm doing and what the project's about."

Hesitant to offer explanations to an interviewer, she shares letters she has received and written. Butler's answers are as fanciful as her drawings. To one correspondent she writes: "I see this project as a story of a girl weeding her way thru a media-saturated society in search of herself. Sometimes this girl is angry, sometimes not so angry, sometimes curious, sometimes good, sometimes bad, sometimes in love. It's a personal Public Art project. It's just these drawings I send out into the world." To another she replies: "Here are some things the project isn't: 1) Funded by the NEA 2) About sports 3) A contribution to a 'cleaner New York.'"

Revealing the identity of the real woman behind the Good Girl, I feel like a saboteur. My own conception of Butler's art shifted after I met her: I imagined a strong feminist boldly attacking linguistic power, but she is surprisingly shy. She sees her work as the product of a painful personal struggle and describes it mostly in psychological, rather than ideological, terms. We're both right. Publicly confronting the way her own life has been shaped by labels passed on from Clairol to Mom to us, Butler confronts every viewer personally. And the time is right for uncovering the mystery of the Good Girl posters: After 280 designs, Butler is moving on, preparing for her own gallery show and the public art projects to come.

Butler grew up a professor's daughter in Buffalo. She dropped out of high school at 14, and although the 38-year-old artist defends her action ("It was 1969, a lot of people were dropping out"), she also confesses, "I was a very bad kid." Butler sees the Good Girl project as addressing the pressures she rebelled against as a teen, and then found herself consumed by again later in life. "One thing I feel is that I couldn't have done these posters in my twenties," she says. "I didn't know this stuff in my twenties."

Butler got her GED and studied art in



Pam Butler, a/k/a Good Girl: reconciling the fantasies we're fed with the realities we live, through the medium of the Magic Marker

Good Girls Do

THIS GUERRILLA ARTIST TAKES THE FEMININE TO THE STREETS
BY EVELYN MCDONNELL

college, finally getting a master's degree from the School of Visual Arts in 1990. By that time she was already interested in how gender shapes artistic vision, and vice versa. From childhood, her influences were largely pop cultural, and it's those images—beauty and fashion magazines, commercials, toys—that she turns every which way, trying to shake loose their encoded cultural assumptions, shake them free. "I've always felt that it's really important as a female artist to own my own imagery," she says. "Feminine imagery doesn't get taken very seriously. I had to accept that my idea of what a picture was came from this very suburban, white-girl kind of stuff. Barbie dolls. Lots of Barbie dolls. Who I am as a person comes out of that." Before the Good Girl project, Butler painted canvases with designs from paper towels and other household objects. "A lot of the Pop Art stuff, one thing they never touch on is a very feminine, kitchen imagery."

Working with black Magic Marker and sheets of white paper, Butler began drawing crude pictures that tapped into childhood memories of women in fashion mags. She named the series after the first drawing that crystallized the project for her: an idealized woman with the words *Good Girl* floating above her head. The image seemed so resonant to her—conjuring a socializing force she had swallowed and forgotten, prompting a recognition she felt sure others would



share—that she imagined these posters all over town. Through learning a medium whose tools (Magic Marker, copying machines, lampposts) aren't taught in art school, Butler has produced stronger and more sophisticated work. The posters have to be bold and simple enough to register in the minds of image-inundated passersby. Within the form, she has developed beautiful lines, swirls of hair that a fashion illustrator would die for, garlands of flowers that could turn coloring books into works of art.

Although images of women remain her main subject, about a year ago Butler began drawing men. She also intersperses fairytale imaginings among the text: *Suppose a knight in shining armor, Suppose I were a boy, Suppose it was all over, Suppose the world didn't mean anything.* "It isn't just about stereotypes," the artist explains. "There's another whole part of it that's about being in the world."

It's that project of reconciling the fantasies we're fed at an early age with the realities we later have to live that Butler is exploring for her April show at FDR Gallery. Her canvases for that exhibit feature the Lollipop Girls—women's heads on stick bodies, who have appeared in some Good Girl posters—and images based on Barbie and Ken dolls, all illustrating lines from romance novels. "One of the things that inspired me to do both projects was knowing a lot of women who are dealing with their sexuality, but what was missing was this sort of romance-novel view of sex, that more female view of eroticism," she says. "It was as if this romance-novel stuff was wrong, was something not to be acknowledged or owned. And I felt that I couldn't own my own sexuality completely, that I could never really feel comfortable in my own sexuality, without acknowledging this huge romantic tendency."

Butler isn't abandoning street art. "There's very little in the tradition of New York guerrilla art done by women, so I wanted to do it, and do it as a woman," she says. "My feeling is that I saw a lot of stuff on the streets by guys. Some of it was all right, some of it was just tagging. But it all seemed to be very male-generated."

There are practical as well as philosophical reasons that street art has been largely a male terrain. Postering is illegal, and women more than men are raised to respect and fear authority. It's an economic issue as well: Any street artist faces the fear of expensive littering fines. Butler's art generates little income (some of her posters and T-shirts are for sale at Muranushi Lederman Gallery and Art Market) and copying costs add up. "I think if I'd known what I was going to put into it when I started, I would never have done it," she says. Furthermore, going onto city streets late at night and graffiti-ing the city with your personal vision is not something good girls do. "I think part of it is fear of the streets at night, or women thinking that they should be afraid of the streets at night. It is a socialization question. I've battled with a lot of that; I still to a certain extent feel apologetic that I put my work all over the city."

The search for ownership comes up repeatedly in Butler's conversation; it is perhaps the central way the Good Girl project has satisfied her. "One of the things that was really interesting when I started doing it was there was a sense of claiming territory," she says. "And I realized that I would find myself in neighborhoods where I used to work, and I don't know if I would have been there otherwise. It was taking that space back, taking back whatever I gave to that particular job. You do claim space, you're leaving your mark."

That satisfaction will probably lead her to another public art project when the Good Girl posters run out. Butler already has ideas for future work. "You get a lot of media impressions all over the place, and you get a lot of advertising stuff coming at you, a constant barrage of prepackaged imagery. So it's just ripe with different ways to play with it. And looking at it from that context, this has only scratched the surface of possibilities. This is just one little tiny piece of what can be played with."