

Questions à Sharon Kivland pour le numéro d'Area revue sur le thème de Vénus.

**Comment as tu orienté une grande partie de ton œuvre autour de la question du désir au féminin ?**

This question should not come as a surprise to me, yet it always does. I can trace a number of trajectories in a practice that spans more years than I care to admit to. In a way, I think my work really coalesced around certain clearly identifiable themes in 1990, when I had a studio at the British School at Rome for a few months. Since then, especially over recent years, my work has become somewhat vaguer, less didactic perhaps, certainly less concerned with the grand gesture of the installation. You and I met over a work I made for Centre d'art at Ivry, a work that circulates around Madame de Lafayette's novel *La Princesse de Clèves*. The work was constructed for the space, a former cinema, and took up four points in the novel where the protagonists, the eponymous princess and M. de Nemours, look at each other, or rather, after the first encounter, fail to meet the gaze of the other. At the end of the novel, when the princess is unencumbered by her fidelity to her husband, who has died of a broken heart, she chooses not to marry Monsieur de Nemours. In a last instance of failed encounter, she is at her glove-makers, and notices that a man is watching her from a window across the courtyard. At the moment she looks, he withdraws from her sight, and because of this withdrawal, she knows it must be her beloved. One might imagine that she has given up on her desire, but in fact, she retains it. Her desire is to have an unsatisfied desire, like the beautiful butcher's wife who tells her dream to Freud. In the dream of the butcher's beautiful wife, the dreamer wanted to give a dinner party, but only had smoked salmon in the house. She could not go shopping for it was Sunday and all the shops were closed. She tried to ring the caterer but the telephone was out of order. She is forced to abandon her wish to give a dinner party. In her real life she creates an unfulfilled wish for herself as well. She loves caviar but begs her loving husband not to give her any. Freud remarks that a dream is an unfulfilled wish, yet in the lack of satisfaction, there is a certain gratification. Dreaming or awake, the butcher's beautiful wife is determined to create a desire that must remain unsatisfied. When Jacques Lacan talks about desire, it is always the desire of the unconscious.

A continuing series, *Mes Fils*, is a collection of round photographs, each showing a woman, the same woman, embracing or being embraced by a young man. It seems perfectly normal at first, and then it is apparent that the woman is old enough to be the man's mother, and – as the series increase – she gets older, the man remains the same age but infinitely replaceable (the woman, incidentally, is me, and the men are all my former students, so there is a double transgression at work). Lacan says that the fundamental desire is the desire for the mother, the prohibited desire of incest. It emerges in the field of the Other and the first occupant of the place of the Other is the mother. In any case, desire is a social product, woven in the dialectical relationship of and with others. Here there is not only the (perceived) prohibited relation of the image, but the place of each viewer, who has to find a place. This is at play in much of my work – the position one takes as viewer. The difficulty of staying in the room with these images is remarked, but what is seldom commented upon is their erotic nature. So one chooses to leave, rather than to obey the odious command to enjoy ! I am reminded of the painting by Bronzino, of the kiss between Venus and Cupid.

There is an incompatibility between desire and satisfaction, between desire and speech, and it is this that I have attempted to take up in my work. Desire has only one object, and that is not the object one desires but the cause of that desire, a missing object that never existed – so the relation is with something that lacks, rather than something that may be obtained. So Madame de Clèves keeps her desire at the expense of ordinary happiness. I have worked with this in other sites, the arcades of Paris, for example, or the *grands magasins* where everything is offered yet one is never completed. In *Le bonheur des femmes*, I followed women about the perfume departments, photographing their feet, then installing the photographs at the height of pelvis/genitals – the names of perfumes were at eye-level and the association of word and image was arbitrary. A recent text work for the Bartlett School of Architecture in London took the publicity for perfumes, changing the stupid phrases only by claiming the personal pronoun, so they read like a vain, mad woman speaking about herself. The words, in vinyl lettering, are the Chanel-pink of

'Allure', and it is as though language might gently scent the air, though with a rather disagreeable after-effect. The oscillation between attraction and repulsion has taken precedence in recent work. One is brought in, then suddenly thrown out ... it is the position of the hysteric.

**Beaucoup de tes séries sont titrées par un adjectif possessif au pluriel, quelle en est la nécessité, la définition de l'univers féminin passe-t-il par la définition et la revendication de ces possessions multiples ?**

I am not sure if this is a futile feminist project of reclamation, a greedy act of (re)possession or an exemplification of the floating signifier, that promiscuous 'I' that anyone can speak. As the artist, I speak them, 'my' ... but the viewer does as well, taking my words for his/her own, just as I might take those of others. In *Ma Nana (neuf fois)*, I take nine descriptions of the body of Nana, the courtesan of Zola's novel - well, at least she inhabits the shadowy *demi-monde* - over several pages when she appears on the stage of the Theatre des Variétés. In the second act, she appears as Venus, letting drop her diaphanous veil. The thoughts, the descriptions, are those of both men and women in the audience. I take them back for Nana, but also for me and then for you, man or woman, as reader: 'La toute-puissance de ma chair', for example. These phrases are embossed on fair calfskin, the size of a nineteenth-century *carte de visite*, then floating on a rose-coloured background in a small frame. It's nine times, my Nana, but could equally be once or twice. Zola writes:

*Un murmure grandit comme un soupir qui se gonflait. Quelques mains battirent, toutes les jumelles étaient fixées sur Vénus. Peu à peu, Nana avait pris possession du public, et maintenant chaque homme la subissait. Le rut qui montait d'elle, ainsi que d'une bête en folie, s'était épandu toujours d'avantage, emplissant la salle. A cette heure, ses moindres mouvements soufflaient le désir, elle retournait la chair d'un geste de son petit doigt. Des dos s'arrondissaient, vibrant comme si des archets invisibles se fussent promenés sur les muscles, des nuques montraient des poils follets qui s'envolaient, sous des haleines tièdes et errantes, venues on ne savait de quelle bouche de femme.*

Back to Lacan, who says 'la femme n'existe pas' - there's no such thing as woman, and it is not 'woman' that is in question, but the definite article - 'the', which indicates universality, is barred. So the use of 'my' follows the same logic, a logic of the non-universal that admits of no exception. I could offer you *Mes pénitentes*. The robes, embroidered in red (like the scarlet letter of Nathaniel Hawthorne's story of the adulteress Hester Prynne) could indeed be worn by anyone, but at this particular moment one is claimed... I could offer you a place, here take one of these chairs, but you will find it is already occupied or at least only recently vacated, still warm with the trace of ma moule, ma chatte, ma fufoune.

**Tu as travaillé l'univers du féminin aussi dans la confrontation à l'Histoire et à l'Hystérie (cf ton livre « A case of hysteria) ce double détour est-il indispensable pour aborder la réalité présente du féminin ? Comment as tu été amenée en tant qu'artiste, commissaire et théoricienne à travailler avec le Centre for Freudian Analysis and Research ?**

I was led to CFAR as a result of transference ! I was following the path of Ida Bauer, Freud's 'Dora', around Europe, and of course encountered the milieu of psychoanalysis in the course of this adventure. It was not enough to read about psychoanalysis ; I felt that art and psychoanalysis were *praxes*, and I had a number of speculations about what they might share that I wanted to follow. I curated nine exhibitions, seven of which are published in *In Place of the Object* (London : JCFAR 2000). The work there is finished, as is my doctorate. I don't work any longer as a curator, and feel usually like a false theorist. That doesn't preclude hysterical identification on my part, however, As for the hysteric, well, that can be a woman or man, but in any case the hysteric may make an object of herself, performing her artful works, or she may assume that she is an object for another, offering herself as artifice, but the desire to know about desire remains unsatisfied; the hysterical subject wants to know

about desire, but does not want to desire for desire can lead only to a hole, The hysteric appropriates the desire of another by identifying with it – which may also answer your last question.

**Le thème de Vénus, dans ses différentes incarnations est il actif et comment dans ton travail, et dans celui de femmes artistes anglaises ou européennes que tu as défendu en tant que commissaire?**

Is Venus the goddess of love or desire ? At the moment I am working on two new works. The first is for Galerie du Cloître in Rennes in September. I am trying to find a woman speaking in Marx's *Capital*. But all I find is an object speaking, the charming voice of a commodity, the chorus of goods going to market. I am putting these against a continuing series, small, round photographs of the back of plates, fabricated in the north of France in the twentieth century, showing the trademark and a name – the name of a woman, but more likely the name of the design. The design on the face of the plate is engraved on the glass of the frame, casting its shadows like a wreath or garland around the names : ANTOINETTE, MADELEINE, ADELE, FAUSTA, PIERRETTE, MARINETTE, JANE and so on. Is this an object or a woman ? Is a 'femme artiste' a woman or an artist ? What am I when I 'arpente' the streets looking for my object ? As an artist, like a detective, I cease for a moment to be a woman.

The second work is taking me much longer – out of laziness as much as anything. I am particularly impressed by French riot police, not only by their magnificent guns, but also by their attractive uniforms. They certainly have the privileged signifier ! I have started collecting them, as images of course, following selected prime examples and taking advantage of my zoom lens to close in upon their handsomely-clad genital area, bordered by their weapon. This extends the work in *Mes fils II*, which was intended to be a series but finally stayed with two photographs. This does not mean the series is complete ; indeed, it may rather be a series that lacks completion. The embossed skins were originally conceived as part of this, but took on their own life. I suppose these have the sense of being trophies, displayed on the wall, and perhaps the riot policemen are also objects to be captured and mounted. In hunting them down, my drive is to complete my collection.

The relation between love and desire is complex. Desire is born from lack – its unsatisfied demand, a demand for love. I make my works, finish them as much as I can, to the best of my ability, and send them out, when I can, into the world. They may produce contingent encounters, and that is all one can hope for. There are moments when the work does its work, but that is always a singular encounter. Perhaps it is indeed a meeting with Venus.

Sharon Kivland, interviewed by Christian Gattinoni, 2005.