

Charlotte Beaudry, MOCAK 2013

Between sacrifice and seduction, alienation and violence, Charlotte Beaudry explores the female lifeworld without recourse to feminine painting *per se*. In soliciting screaming colours, vast surfaces, careless strokes, and dripping paint, she quite on the contrary affirms the violent nature of painting and appropriates its aggressive encounter with matter and materiality.

In contemporary art, painting is anachronistic and therefore insolent. It pays no lip service to contextual art and ridicules its criticism of commodification, institutions, and traditional forms of representation.¹ At its most victorious moments, it diffuses a vitriolic cynicism with regard to the pretence and ambition of contextual art.² Beaudry has reached these cynical heights in some of her most popular series; see for example her blown-up series *Slip* (2010) and *Sac de filles* (2011), or her endless tracings of the young girl *Julliette*. On the gallery wall she outlined the spectacular point of no return of commodity culture, at the centre of which she not surprisingly placed the girl.

Being a woman painter however is not only an act of cynical anachronism; it is also utterly *risqué*. Women artists generally prefer other media and tactics to painting; the history of painting is a silenced history of exclusion and objectification of women, its smothering lurks around each brushstroke and naked canvas. It is therefore only cautiously and with great suspicion that women penetrate this pornocratic world as constituted by the materiality, action, and representation of painting. The woman painter is transgressive, an ambiguous colonizer of men's land; she is perceived as brutal and scandalous both to men and as woman.

It has been a constant endeavour of Beaudry to question these limits of painting and female subjectivity; she meticulously explored the twofold sacrilege of painting *after painting* and of the woman painter. As *Juliette* she embodied both a ruthless and insecure stance; shifting from one leg to the other, she realised in painting what Julia Kristeva called "the open-structure of adolescence."³ Indeed Beaudry not only painted adolescent girls; her practice was also one of painting-as-adolescence, an open, doubtful, and ambiguous exploration of painting and the woman painter.⁴

In her recent work on display in this exhibition (MOCAK, 2013) however, Beaudry seems to reappear at the affirmative end of this exploration. No longer reactive to the insulting grimace of the canvas, she now takes the lead and masters dimensions, movements, and colours with ease and carelessness. In response to art theoretical questions, she answers with the insolence of materiality and the pleasure of

¹ See Jan Swidzinski, *Art et Son Contexte*, Inter Canada, 2010; Paul Ardenne, *Un art contextuel*, Flammarion, 2002.

² See for instance, Luc Tuymans, *Still Life*, 2002, Documenta11.

³ See Julia Kristeva, *New Maladies of the Soul*, Columbia University Press, 1995, and Julia Kristeva, "The Adolescent Novel", in J. Fletcher and A. Benjamin (eds.), *Abjection, Melancholia, and Love*, Routledge, 2012 (1990), pp.8-23. Kristeva explores novel writing as adolescence, but I think the concept applies to some explorations in visual arts.

⁴ For more examples of art-as-adolescence, see C. Grant and L. Waxman (eds.), *Girls! Girls! Girls! In Contemporary Art*, Intellect, 2011.

deranging the spectators' expectations. Beaudry testifies here to a strong and mocking affirmation: "I paint and paint, again and again." It is not in the numb or presumptuous adult state of contentment or knowledge that she has overcome the open structure of adolescence, but in the stubborn female affirmation of painting against all counter-evidence and expectations.

It has been a constant feature of Beaudry's work to play freely with the dimensions of the canvas. Small, delicate paintings like *Ongles*, *Couronne*, and *Fleur* are easily followed by blown-up or larger than life images (*Chevelure*, *Robe*, *Dress*). This variation challenges the gaze and the patience of the spectator; we have to readjust our eyes, which slows down the movement of perception and appropriation. In this way Beaudry forces us to spend more time in front of her paintings than our desire for spectacle, consumption and appropriation inspires us to do. Hence she relocates painting to the centre of not only the artistic but also the feminist practice.

Those who are familiar with her work, have experienced how Beaudry's small dimensions are treacherous and by no means a guarantee for *luxe, calme, et volupté*. The small paintings disarm the spectator's eyes by installing a longing for delicate, feminine miniatures, yet it is precisely these defenceless eyes that are the ideal targets for Beaudry's meticulously prepared attack. Her ruse is to plant her sharp, fake, and screaming nails and her faceless and frigid crown into the eyes she first disarmed by means of small dimensions. Bull's eye!

In her use of smooth surfaces and outrageous colours, culminating in the use of red and yellow (*La Dionée*), Beaudry radicalises her dissecting explorations. Being master of the canvas now and no longer negotiating each movement and stroke, she unmask all false signs and reveals radical absence at the heart of the female lifeworld. Women, who were supposed to succeed the girls, have tellingly disappeared from Beaudry's paintings. Unsentimentally retracing this absence as women's violent sacrifice, disillusioned rest, or lustful escape, Beaudry is the spectator's clairvoyant; she unveils, registers, and commemorates women as absence.

In *Chevelure*, *Robe*, *Dress*, *Couronne*, and *Scarf*, women are painfully present by this absence. Have they been sacrificed? Did they escape from their common destiny? Or are they disillusioned, no longer distinguishable from the background into which they faded? What is certain is that these paintings make up a merry-go-round that endlessly rotates to the soundtrack of a foreboding lullaby, which is stressed by the circular form of *Fleur* and *Trous*, and supported by the rhythmically falling flowers of *Bouquets de fleurs*. But what is the nature of this haunting song? Is it just a female trick to fool fate as *Chevelure* suggests? Or does it announce the disillusioned refusal of subjectivity by choosing for tradition and sociability as *Bouquet de fleurs* proposes? Or are we rather looking through *Trous* at the nightmarish sacrifice of cut out *Flowers*?

In Beaudry's paintings the sacrifice is profound and total. The fingers (*Janvier*, *Février*, *Mars*) are not only cut off by wedding rings, they are also maggots that infest us and announce death, sperm that injects us with maternity, and solo pleasures that make us temporarily forget our ritualised, if not already dead, sexual lives, precisely what the deafening, desiring, yet impotent *Bouches* are revealing. The belt of the colourful *Robe* and the *Dress*, from which the head is cut off, crudely transform sacrifice into suicide, the common fate of the disciplined and constricted female body.

Yet the images also evoke the comfort and tenderness of mother's breasts and skirts, on which we never noticed the corset or prison stripes.

Scarf and *Chevelure* are of a different cruelty; the furry scarf and the hair, behind which we can still distinguish some female contours, the last trace of woman, hint at feral forces. Both speak in different ways, *Scarf* with its spikey carelessness and *Chevelure* with its feminine smoothness, of animism, referring to haunting spirits of primitive, sacrificial times and devouring desires of undomesticated animals. Yet *Scarf*, with its horizontal circularity, and *Chevelure*, with its vertical movement, are also order and containment, or suppression of these life-creating yet radical forces.

Scarf and *Chevelure* are suffocation and strangulation, but also ruse, seduction, protection, camouflage, and escape; they are the sexual cry that breaks the sacred chain of tradition, and in this way they prepare the triumph of *La Dionée*, the empress of this collection. This Venus Fly-trap realises radical seduction (remember the fabulous red and orange of Beaudry's *Slips*, MOCAP, Krakow); it is for the spectator to enter this temptation – *How could we resist?* – and discover the hells and paradises of the treacherous yellow.

Even though Beaudry is above all a painter, her video work is outstanding in the rich tradition of feminist video art. Because of her precise historic insight, she succeeds at both respecting and subverting this tradition. In her video projection, *Anne*, Beaudry explores female identity in the context of spectacle and consumerist society. Comparing this video projection with Martha Rosler's iconic *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, we see how with time woman has broken out of the traditional *topos* and radicalised her aggression, yet she is still confined in space, even though the kitchen has evolved into an anonymous and undefined white background, she is still the object of dressage, even though her hair goes loose and her skirt tears open, and more importantly, she is still in the most intimate grip of objects that discipline and punish her.

Anne is a female psycho-geography, in which Beaudry implements drifts, diversions, and subversions of the objectification of women. Hair, heels, and skirt play out an exasperating choreography, and the banal objects in the handbag turn out to be weapons, aiming at us, the spectators, but, unfortunately, it is precisely our spectator's gaze that violently returns these objects to Anne, and imprisons her thereby in the frame of the camera.

Beaudry's work is of a complex and dense narrativity, notwithstanding its minimal narrative disposition. Audaciously, she is faithful to her unique and rich feminism: no exaltation of femininity, but a self-critique of the complicity in which women are caught up and a self-derision of the pleasure inherent in this. For Beaudry no single-layered rebuttal of masculinity, but a more extensive critique of the sacrificial society of spectacle and consumerism, and a radical appropriation of seduction, sexuality, and violence. In her moving sculpture *Pleasure*, Beaudry concisely but effectively restates her unpretentious punk feminism: *I pleasure you, you pleasure me, and now please fuck off; I pleasure myself.*

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