Sylvie Fleury

Dress Prim, Feel Saucy

Geneva-based artist Sylvie Fleury is known for her staging of glamour, fashion and the luxury items of the modern world of commodities. The artist knows no material or formal limits – she expresses herself through painting, sculpture, neon, video, performance and installation.[1]

By staging luxury items in new contexts, Fleury poses fundamental questions about the power of the status symbols that have become fetishes of consumption. She questions their actual value and transforms products – basically readymades à la Marcel Duchamp – into autonomous works of art. Perhaps Fleury's most iconic works are the readymade shopping bag installations she has shown since the early 1990s and which feature luxury goods purchased by the artist. Since then, her interest in appropriating objects has been a striking feature of her artistic practice.

The early installation *Untitled* of 1992 in the Nicola Erni Collection likewise consists of readymade objects. As one of Fleury's key works, it has been exhibited in the Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst (Zurich, 1998–99), Schirn Kunsthalle (Frankfurt, 2002), and Tate Liverpool (2002–03). An ottoman is set on a plush rose-coloured carpet; various shoeboxes and some twenty pairs of elegant women's shoes are scattered about. Some of the shoes are still in their boxes, wrapped in tissue paper, and some lay carelessly in front of the ottoman, as if they had just been tried on a moment prior. The installation provokes thoughts and feelings of voyeurism – the fabricated scene seems to be a personal space bearing the traces of a particular person. Furthermore, as a constructed allegory of many women's fantasies, it evokes fetishised desire.

Falling somewhere between Pop appropriation and Minimalist aesthetics, Sylvie Fleury's pieces blur the lines between art, advertising and fashion and challenge stereotypes and consumer culture. But her work is perhaps not without ambiguity, as she herself loves consumption as much as she might expose it. With her alluring appropriation of fashion codes and readymade compositions, she calls out our consumerist desires and fetishistic ideas in a kind of Neo-Pop glam.

Her humorous take on culture is often reflected in her choice of materials, and the works often feature intensely haptic and exuberant surfaces – be they super glossy or super furry. For the *Cuddly Paintings* installation, Fleury paired each of her rectangular monochrome faux fur 'paintings' with a pair of casted boots (pp. 24–25). Here one finds the essentials of Minimalist art practice – industrially produced materials used in serial repetition. This approach becomes more distinctive in her adaptations of works by Piet Mondrian, in which Fleury substituted the Dutchman's prime colours with plush, colourful additions.[2]

Mondrian's renowned compositions are not merely widely recognisable, they have also served as inspiration for previous adaptations. In the 1990s, L'Oréal appropriated Mondrian's art for the packaging of their Studio Line, and further back, in the 1960s, Yves Saint Laurent created the Mondrian Collection. Sylvie Fleury would eventually use one of the Mondrian dresses in a performance.[3] The art and the fashion world are seemingly self-referential systems, preferring to operate by their own rules. While the fashion and cosmetics industries as well as their advertising have appropriated designs and imagery from the art world in the past, it was a refreshing provocation when Fleury began to appropriate and implement different objects and slogans from fashion.

The fashion world commonly borrows visuals – albeit adapted and altered – from established artists whose works are widely recognised. Fleury turns the tables and overthrows the hierarchies that determine when a creation is considered 'art' by proposing that commercial images can be as resonant and influential as a fine artist's oeuvre. She not only uses the design of products – such as eyeshadow palettes transformed into minimalist paintings – but adapts aspects of the marketing of these products. Words or whole sentences are reimagined as neon signs or in serial form as a part of wall paintings. In the wall painting *Pleasures*, the appellation and typeface for which were taken from the design of the eponymous perfume by Estée Lauder, the word 'Pleasures' appears various times on broad alternating bands of black and pink. The pattern and colour scheme, however, is reminiscent of the visual branding of Victoria's Secret lingerie. Pleasures perfume was released in 1995, and the wall painting was conceived a year later. The marketing for such products operate through emotion that is conveyed via image and text.[4] And the slogans, brand names, product names and even colour indications (such as 'Rouge Cinema' or 'Bubble Pink' for nail polishes) are the result of a highly creative and ultimately elaborate process within the fashion industry. By appro-priating the marketing instruments and putting them into a different context – that of art – Fleury seeks to draw attention to these mechanisms of consumer behaviour and thus spread awareness, but without a moralising undertone.

Fleury's artworks featuring globally distributed fashion magazines that embody consumption and mass-production point in a similar direction. The diptych *Fashion* features the covers of Italian *Vogue* from January 2000 and in the work *Dress Prim, Feel Saucy*, the visible price stickers emphasise how the cover of *Vogue* UK from October 2001 was clearly photographed and enlarged. The title patently appropriated from the magazine cover recontextualis-es the language and forces the viewer to think anew about the words being used,[5] but it also manages to view it in a humorous way. Ambiguity is ubiquitous in Fleury's oeuvre: at first glance, the visuals and text spread awareness of consumer behaviour (including the artist's);[6] but rather than exposing people as passive victims, she underscores the ability of such customising products to serve women as a form of self-empowerment,[7] inevitably producing a form of 'Girl Power'.

Fleury's works deal in binaries: male and female, producer and consumer, yin and yang,[8] with the first pair mentioned spanning throughout her oeuvre.[9] Fleury likes to cover objects typically (or stereotypically) seen as masculine with a strong feminine aesthetic. Phallic objects such as rockets or mushrooms are dyed in cheerful colours like pink or purple, coated with a shiny surface, or supplemented with a playful faux fur, all elements that serve to disarm.[10] She likewise plays with female and male clichés concerning consumption and libido. In her work one can recognise allusions to canonical artworks by twentieth-century male artists which are given an overtly feminine make-over: Fleury references with playful ease works by Andy Warhol, Lucio Fontana,[11] Victor Vasarely and the above-mentioned Mondrian. She counters the dominant male position in art history (particularly Pop art and Minimalism) with female humour and in so doing creates a kind of reference system.[12]

But as the artist herself implies, her approach could but should not be read as an outright feminist act, but rather as engendering a balance or bringing contrasting elements into a creation: 'When I poured a glitter blob onto a Donald Judd-type creation, I put some yin into the yang.'[13] The artist combines and unites various codes and insignias of sometimes opposing nature – high and popular culture, male and female, fashion and art, customised identities[14] and individualism with mass-produced products – and thus suspends hierarchies and conventions – most importantly, with seemingly astonishing ease.[15]

Fabiola Son

1 Simon Lamunière, Introduction to Samuel Gross (ed.), *Sylvie Fleury*, Zurich 2015, p. 5.
2 Verena Hein, 'Schön und sonderbar', in: *Sylvie Fleury: My Life on the Road*, Berlin 2016, p. 23.
3 Interview with Sylvie Fleury, by Samuel Gross, in: Gross (ed.), *Sylvie Fleury*, p. 68.
4 Hein, 'Schön und sonderbar', p. 22.
5 Alex Gartenfeld, 'Dionysian Scenes', in: Gross (ed.), *Sylvie Fleury*, p. 87.
6 Fleury, interviewed by Gross, p. 68.
7 Ibid., p. 69.
8 Beatrix Ruf, 'Customize', *Parkett* 58 (2000), p. 98.
9 Lionel Bovier and Christophe Cherix, 'Filling Those Nasty Bumper Holes! Another Conversation', in: *Sylvie Fleury: First Spaceship on Venus and Other Vehicles* (exhib. cat., 24a Bienal Internacional de São Paulo), Baden 1998, p. 55.
10 Hein, 'Schön und sonderbar', p. 17.
11 Ibid., p. 23.
12 Ibid., p. 26.
13 Fleury, interviewed by Gross, p. 68.
14 Joshua Decter, 'Beyond the Cosmetics of Elastic Culture', in: *Sylvie Fleury: First Spaceship*, p. 71.
15 Jutta Koether, 'The Nonchalance of Continuous Tense-ness', *Parkett* 58 (2000), p. 104.

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***Fashion (Vogue Italia, January 2000, no. 593)*, 2000**
Digital prints, diptych
172 × 125 cm each

Reach Out and Touch (Vogue Italia, May 2017), 2018
Digital print
167 × 125 cm

ALTA MODA! (Vogue Italia, September 1993, supplemento al n° 517), 2009
Digital print
155 × 125 cm

In Bed with Kim & Kanye (Harper's Bazaar, September 2016), 2016
Digital print
156 × 125 cm

Dress Prim, Feel Saucy (Vogue UK, October 2001), 2016
Digital print
166 × 125 cm

The Waist Returns (Vogue UK, April 2001), 2016
Digital print
165 × 125 cm

Cristal Custom Commando (gold), 2008
Destroyed Chanel bag and target
59.5 × 42 × 60 cm

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Untitled, 1992
Carpet, ottoman, shoes, shoeboxes and wrapping paper
64 × 333 × 240 cm

Pleasures, 1996
Acrylic paint on wall
Dimensions variable

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Cuddly Painting (turquoise with green boots), 2018
Faux fur, stretchers, staples, casted Vetements boots and paint
80 × 80 cm

Cuddly Painting (beige with purple boots), 2018
Faux fur, stretchers, staples, casted Vetements boots and paint
80 × 80 cm

Cuddly Painting (yellow with pink boots), 2020
Faux fur, stretchers, staples, casted Vetements boots and paint
80 × 80 cm