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Abstract

Many theorists of the image do prefer to see in it an ineffable epiphany, a presence or gift for the senses that heralds, above all, the advent of form, colour, texture and the other features of perceptual experience, even when the image refers the world. The paintings in Audrey Flack's *Photorealism* series seem to have been conceived by its author to simultaneously confirm and invalidate this hypothesis about the existence of a pure semiotics of the image. Saturated with sensible qualities, they nevertheless constitute a language of visual hypersigns capable of putting together a story, and of constructing an argumentation, about the feminine condition contemporary of its production. That while still wrapping story and argumentation in a *pop* aura, and in an apparent celebration of *kitsch*, behind which hides, to better reveal itself to the attentive viewer, a sophisticated inter-artistic and inter-discursive elaboration, that turns them into the thinking and acting devices of a feminism both tender and ironic.

Keywords

Audrey Flack, *Pop Art*, *Kitsch*, Irony, Feminism



Picture 1: Audrey Flack, *Pretty Woman* (1972-1973), oil and acrylic on canvas, 181x243cm. Image copyright fair use.

1. Introduction

Is it feasible to narrate the status of women (of a certain class of women) at the end of the last century, the height of the feminist movement, through the appropriation of the historical resources of art, subjected to a process of radical updating? Such appears to be the issue of paintings like these, most of which belong to the *Photorealism* series, made by Audrey Flack¹ from roughly 1971 to 1981.



Picture 2: Audrey Flack, *Energy Apples* (1976), oil and acrylic on canvas, 121x122cm. Image copyright fair use.

Whoever contemplates them, after the first aesthetic surprise, cannot but feel admiration for its technical quality, its semantic complexity and its cultural density.

2. Some paintings with a lot of art

The viewer immediately perceives them through a triple inter-artistic filter, made up of the languages called to contribute to its genesis, the pictorial genres taken up and the aesthetic movements requested there —Audrey Flack is a highly learned creator.

The very title of the collection, *Photorealism*, unambiguously declares the languages chosen for its conception: those of the consolidated tradition of realistic painting, and of the hyper-realist one,



Picture 3: Audrey Flack, *Queen* (1976), oil and acrylic on canvas, 203x203cm. Image copyright fair use.

in the process of institutionalization; and, at the same time, those of photography, whose codes of production and recognition of images take pleasure in mimicking these works, albeit superimposing a hyperbolic prosody on them.

Regarding the recovered genres, critics detected, from the beginning, the *still life* and the *vanitas*, rewritten for the occasion with a neo-baroque spirit that anticipated, from the point of view of practice, the forging of this concept by Omar Calabrese in 1987². With one caveat: what is dead, in these "dead natures" – its designation in Spanish, "naturalezas muertas" – is not nature, but culture, since they are highly artificial pictures. As for the aesthetic movements absorbed in Flack's paintings, they are, of course, those the artist was responsible for processing and transforming in her time: *pop*, its *camp* derivation, and also, in particular, what concerns to object art – and to the industrial design that constitutes its substrate. Movements, all of them, characterized by a determined *trans* vocation (trans-linguistic, trans-generic, trans-aesthetic).

3. An art with a lot of discourse

But this accumulation of appropriations and anticipations would be a mere exercise in style if it was not for the fact that Flack's *still lifes* and *vanitas*, a display of dazzling visual insights, equally possess a rare narrative eloquence, which is not far from becoming *dianoia*, a discursive reason.

The works in the *Photorealism* series, in effect, narrate and argue with a constancy, and in a plurality of registers, that overwhelms the beholder. Confronted with the previous images, and with others like the following, one reads in them, from the outset, a clear confession about the seductions of the discourse of advertising, its internal referent:



Picture 4: Audrey Flack, *Rolls-Royce Lady* (1981), oil and acrylic on canvas, 50x60cm. Image copyright fair use.

However, this advertising discourse emerges, from the painting, in such an emphatic way that it requests a less obvious reception on second-degree: the one that we would grant to typical research, in communication theory, regarding advertising as the main architect of the social imaginaries of the



Picture 5: Audrey Flack, *Chanel* (1977), oil and acrylic on canvas, 142x208cm. Image copyright fair use.

of late capitalism. Imaginaries culturally marked by *kitsch*, and economically determined by the fetishism of merchandise: the integral aestheticization of life, in which the logical cause of the end of art has been seen³, corresponds to the belief, studied by the social sciences since Marx, that material goods are the axiological center of human life; and that from them derive all the values we can aspire to (and, especially, apart from beauty, happiness and security, these post-modern versions of truth and good).

The jewels, bibelots and dressings, superabundant in Flack's paintings, compose a sort of catalogue of industrial beauty. And they are, at the same time, the instruments with which the existential experience of the mass subject is manufactured. A subject surrounded and harassed by its polished and gleaming mechanized perfection.

Anyway, they are not about the experience of any subject, but, as we have already mentioned, about that of a woman; or, better, of a certain model of a contemporary woman, summoned as the phantom that inhabits the inert matter of the fetish.

Because the series of neo-baroque *still lifes* and *vanitas* by Audrey Flack, in addition to displaying, with visual means, the objective (embedded in objects) narration of the mass consumer's destiny, as the theory of communication and the social sciences would do with verbal means; and, in addition to auguring, through the plastic excess they lend to such objects and its representation, the extinction of art and its replacement by a multiplication of *simulacra* of beauty, as aesthetic theory would do, also supports a consistently feminist discourse: the discourse who announces and denounces, at the same time, that —Simone de Beauvoir wrote this sentence a few years before the public presentation of the paintings— “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.”⁴

This is, undoubtedly, the hierarchically superior discourse —the critics soon detected it⁵— in the dense interdiscourse of a kind of images whose apparent realistic homoglossia transmits a rich and varied critical heterology.

4. An inter-discourse with a lot of sense

Realistic homoglossia, certainly, or the extraordinary effect of reality of these images concocted as a hypersign or total sign, since they fuse, without residues, three different semiotics that work together: the semiotics of the natural world (the objects represented in them already are significant as objects)⁶, the double visual semiotics of representation (the conventions of lifelike painting and of photography), and the verbal semiotics (all encyclopedic knowledge, mostly linguistic, associated with those objects and visual codes, which seem eminently describable, translatable).



Picture 6: Audrey Flack, *Marriage* (1979), oil and acrylic on canvas, 120x160cm. Image copyright fair use.

That said, *Photorealism* also transcends semiotic virtuosity thanks to the inflection that its hypersigns impose to the sociology of gender transported by the series. The female subject described there carries on her shoulders —on her adorned and made-up body— the obligation to become a woman by accumulating the symbols of a stereotypical femininity, embodied, in mass culture, by the muse Marilyn.



Picture 7: Audrey Flack, *Elegy I* (1980), oil and acrylic on canvas, 243x243cm. Image copyright fair use.

These symbols (jewels, cosmetics, *bibelots*, ceramics, crystals, etc.) are called to operate, *en bloc*, as vectors of a rigorously imaginary drive for social identity, for the crystallization of a fabled and fabulous feminine self, completely different from the indeterminate psychic self of any of us. A self whose social realization is ambivalent: desirable and obligatory at the same time, normative and fascinating; and, finally, potentially lethal, since it is, by definition, impossible⁷.

Thus, the *vanitas* *Elegy II*, also consecrated to Marilyn, spills from a brush, almost on the head of the girl who was once Norma Jean, a drop of blood-red, a simultaneous signifier of aesthetic representation and of existential mortification:



Picture 8: *Elegy II* (1980), oil and acrylic on canvas, 243x243cm. Image copyright fair use.

Then, more than in the perspective displayed on the social fabrication of female identity, not very new for its time, it is there, in its insistence on the failure of the subject in her effort to transform the (imaginary) desire for female identity into (real) fulfilled and satisfied experience, where the greatest interest of Flack's works lies. Because the immanent functioning of the symbolic does not allow it: the realization of the symbol is delayed in that of other symbols⁸, such as that of a trope of the socialized woman in another trope, through these saturated and saturating paintings. Only death puts a chronological end, not a logical one, to the symbolic proliferation. The indefinite self of the biological subject, no matter how much it tries in this way, cannot fully constitute itself as a feminine self.

Here is, we think, the discursive intention of Flack's story in images about the social condition of women. For, in fact, a double negative mark discredits there the symbolic chains, those of the painted signs and those of the painting of the signs.

At the level of the painted signs, or of the visual statement, the signifiers of femininity are empty of denotation, and of truth: neither those fruits are fruits, but rather *simulacra* of fruit, neither such jewelry has the value of a jewel, nor a plastic hourglass like that can measure time. At the level of the painting of the signs, or of its visual enunciation, Flack's trans-artisticity dissolves into irony. Not only has it been executed, in many cases, by painting over an underlying photograph, but to top it all, as an aesthetic exercise, it is over-acted: ostentatiously displayed, but not assumed by its author⁹. Flack pretends to take over the feminine universe, but exclusively for better subverting it. Still, she does not condemn with the rigorism of a moralist or with the radicalism of a militant: her enunciative attitude, as an artist, consists, rather, in having a look into it at the same time tender and distant, complicit and critical, very distinctively *pop*.

In short, a master lesson, that updates, playfully, older masters' lessons, placing them in its new social environments, and in the material culture of the end of the past century:



Picture 9: Audrey Flack, *Leonardo's Lady* (1974), oil and acrylic on canvas, 188x203cm. Image copyright fair use.

We do not know if the mysterious Lady originally painted by Leonardo would appreciate the *kitsch* ecosystem to which she has been incorporated in Flack's works. But she was probably forced to pursue, with the same tenacity as the one portrayed by the American artist —almost always *in absentia*, or through object delegation—, an imaginary ideal of a woman. And perhaps the jewel that adorns her forehead, surely of better quality than its imitations in the modern cultural context, served her, according to certain historians¹⁰, to hide some deadly injury (a venereal disease) linked to her relationships with men, in the same way that the 70s and 80s woman, according to Flack, was destined first for frustration, and then for death.

Such is the political and axiological limit imposed by the creator to the ambiguous complacency that her images seem to show towards that feminine universe.

¹ Audrey Flack is a well-known American painter, sculptor and photographer. Pioneer of the genre of hyperrealism, her work is exhibited in major museums, including the Museum of Modern Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, the Allen Memorial Art Museum, the National Gallery of Australia, etc. She is an honorary professor at George Washington University and Bridgeport University, a visiting professor at the University of Pennsylvania, and has taught and lectured around the world. Her aesthetic and intellectual legacy lives on to influence many American and International artists today.

² Omar Calabrese, *L'età neobarocca* (Bari: Laterza: 1987).

³ Arthur Danto, *After the End of Art: Contemporary Art and the Pale of History* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998); Jean Baudrillard, *Le complot de l'art* (Paris: Sens & Tonka, 1997).

⁴ Simone de Beauvoir, *Le deuxième sexe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949 [1976]), 191.

⁵ V. Katherine Hauser, "Audrey Flack's Still Lifes: Between Femininity and Feminism", *Woman's Art Journal* 22, no. 2 (2001-2002): 26-30.

⁶ So significant that there is not only a semiotics, but also an anthropology, a history and a sociology of objects. See, for example, for the first, Anne Béyaert, *Sémiotique des objets. La matière du temps* (Liège: Presses Universitaires de Liège, 2015); and, for the latter, Pierre Singaravélou et Sylvain Venayre, *Le magasin du monde. La mondialisation par les objets du XVIII^e siècle à nos jours* (Paris: Fayard, 2020).

⁷ Jacques Lacan, *Séminaire V* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1998).

⁸ Jacques Lacan, "D'une question préliminaire à tout traitement possible de la psychose", in *Écrits* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1966), 531-583.

⁹ Alain Rabatel, "Ironie et sur-énonciation", *Vox romanica* 71 (2012): 42-76; J.-C. Coquet, *Physis et Logos. Une phénoménologie du langage* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de Vincennes, 2007), 23-39; Jacques Fontanille, *Sémiotique du discours* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de Limoges, 2003), 282.

¹⁰ François Boucher, *Histoire du costume en Occident* (Paris: Flammarion, 1996), 127.

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