

# JOAN

## The Black Box: John Miller

What happens when a camera confronts a woman? Does it go on to “represent” her with an image, does it transform her, leave her intact or does it perform some kind of inscrutable operation that we believe to be transparent? In a so-called heteronormative, i.e., patriarchal, world, images of women function as paradigmatic emblems of desire. The most popular of these, as registered by recent Google searches, are mainstream pop stars such as Beyonce Knowles, Joanna Krupa, Rihanna or Kesha. The camera promises to offer them to us. Yet, no apparatus simply delivers anything from “out there,” but instead interpellates various “subjectivities” and “objectifications” within its interior, implicating both viewer and viewed alike. Moreover, the distribution of its output occurs not after the fact but as a concurrent extension of the camera apparatus.

Much of Servane Mary’s work concerns images of women drawn from archival photographs. These she prints digitally, typically in black, onto a variety of surfaces, ranging from mylar rescue blankets to plexiglass to acetate to plastic tubes. As such, the images becomes sculptural, emmanting from unstretched material suspended in space or from rigid forms, standing or leaning. The variability of surfaces and supports Mary deploys suggests that the photographic information is mobile, that it can “lie loosely” (to paraphrase Villem Flusser) on anything. If the photo must rely on a material substrate to make itself evident, as information, it also appears to be utterly indifferent to that support. Consider Robert Rauschenberg’s image transfer work. The transfer registers its source as much as the composition it enters into. It’s half in and half out, neither here nor there. Such works are often described as “mixed media.” In other words, the constituent elements fail to integrate like they are supposed to. Their relationship verges on antagonism.

The women portrayed in Mary’s work include, among others, biker chicks, cowgirls, and *tondues*—or *collaborateurs horizontale*, i.e., French women who took German soldiers as partners in Vichy France. These figures all resist gender stereotyping in curious ways—in ways that inevitably become fashionable. For this reason, perhaps, their recognizability as charismatic outsiders finds expression in cinema: Marianne Faithful as Rebecca in *The Girl on a Motorcycle* (1968), Elizabeth Taylor as Leslie Lynnton Benedict in *Giant* (1956), or Emmanuelle Riva as Elle in *Hiroshima mon amour* (1959). Although these movie icons aspire to symbolic timelessness, they are freighted with specific histories. The biker chick may be the most overdetermined: independent, rebellious, sexy, empowered. If Susan B. Anthony once declared that, “The bicycle has done more for the emancipation of women than anything else in the world,” the leather-clad biker chick conversely has become a sub-genre of soft-core porn. The cowgirl, for her part, brings pioneer spirit to entertainment. During the westward expansion of the United States, the demands of frontier life and ranching found women working alongside men, even on cattle drives. Wild west shows in turn featured cowgirls; Annie Oakley became an undisputed star of these. The initial expectation that women wear skirts meant riding “side saddle,” which was more restrictive than simply straddling a horse. Ultimately, skirts gave way to jeans, now a hallmark of cowgirl style, which allowed women to ride horses just like men. The *tondue* is a less familiar type. After the Liberation, French women who consorted with German occupiers were rounded up to have their heads shaved as a form of public humiliation. The symbolism is clear: Long hair is feminine and shaving it off nullifies femininity. This practice originated in the Middle Ages when the Visigoths used it to punish women for adultery. In the twentieth century, German fascists revived it for women accused of *Rassenschade*: relations with non-Aryans. After the war, the French reciprocated, now singling out those who formed relationships with German soldiers. Tellingly, no such punishments were visited on male collaborators and

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some accounts even suggest that they scape-goated their female counterparts to distract attention from their own misdeeds. Thirty years later, the shaved head re-emerged as “a look” when Punk claimed it as a counter-fascist symbol.

If “the future is plastics,” Servane Mary’s choice of materials marks a clean break with the past. Bakelite—not yet used by Mary—is the first synthetic plastic, invented by Leo Baekeland in 1907. For this Baekeland coined the term “plastic.” Other kinds soon followed. It’s a curious exercise to inventory these, to see who invented what and for what end, especially because plastics seemingly eschew the organic world. One of the oldest forms of thermoplastic, i.e., material that can be shaped when heated, is acetate. In 1910, the Swiss brothers Camille and Henri Dreyfus produced an acetate lacquer from cellulose called “dope” that was used to coat the bodies of aircraft. Acetate was later used in synthetic fibers, film stock, and magnetic tape. Plexiglass is a trade name for Poly(methyl methacrylate) or PMMA. The German firm Rohm and Haas AG trademarked it in 1933 as a lightweight substitute for glass—widely used in WWII for submarine periscopes, aircraft windsheilds and gun turrets. In the 1950s NASA developed mylar as a protective insulation for spacecraft. Mylar is a trade name for biaxially-oriented polyethylene terephthalate or BoPET, a stretched polyester film with high tensile strength. After runners in the New York City Marathon adopted the material as lightweight wraps to prevent hypothermia, mylar blankets quickly found their way into medical emergency kits. In 1966, Andy Warhol produced Silver Clouds, a floating array of pillow-shaped mylar balloons filled with helium. Now similar balloons routinely commemorate birthdays, July 4th, weddings, Easter, Hannakuh, graduations, whatever. Plastics are everywhere. This list is hardly exhaustive. Peeling back their familiar trade names leaves a mouthful of forbidding molecular conglomerations that remind us of their underlying chemical derivation... the results of research driven by a nascent military industrial complex.

A precedent for Servane Mary’s work can be found in photo sculpture that came to the fore in the 1980s East Village scene. Both Jennifer Bolande and Allan Belcher worked in this manner. They combined photos with objects, resulting in a tension between photographic indexicality and sculpture as a thing-in-itself, namely a tension between presence and absence. If a sculpture presents itself as an obdurate object claiming a discrete space of its own, a photograph always points elsewhere. Bolande, for example, once printed plywood patterns onto show window curtains. When the curtains were closed, the store looked as if it were boarded up. Belcher has superimposed the generic icon for JPEG files onto ceramic blocks, in effect converting a virtual image into something of a “stumbling block.” Mary courts an even more rarified tension because the “thing-in-itself” in her work, the material substrate, is so often synthetic. Thus, its presence can seem provisional. If synthetic materials necessarily result from historical experimentation and invention, their juxtaposition with images of women in Mary’s work reminds us that the familiar paradigms of femininity are constructions, ones that are not necessarily inevitable. Curiously, when she studied art, the subject was still called arts plastique. It reflects an older sense of the word plastic, namely something that can be molded or shaped. The term arts plastique captures a utopian aspiration, yet hints at artificiality. Since the term can imply a process of becoming as well as a prospective phantasmagoria, one wonders, when the camera meets plastic, “Where does amnesia begin and history leave off?”