

ETC



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Number 42, June–July–August 1998

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/469ac>

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Publisher(s)

Revue d'art contemporain ETC inc.

ISSN

0835-7641 (print)

1923-3205 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Lamontagne, V. (1998). Review of [The Post-Modern Model of Feminism / Margaret Lawther, *Méduse Négociée*, Galerie Lilian Rodriguez, Montréal. Du 22 novembre au 20 décembre 1997]. *ETC*, (42), 55–56.

MONTREAL

THE POST-MODERN MODEL OF FEMINISM

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Margaret Lawther, *La Sorcière I* and *La Sorcière II*, 1997.

To compose an exhibition around the theme of Medusa is to look at the beast-woman straight in the eyes. When the work is invoked through photography, a double take, and a re-consideration of the theme of Medusa imposes itself. Margaret Lawther's exhibition, *Méduse Négociée*, presented at Galerie Lilian Rodriguez, offered a compelling re-negotiation of feminist ethics seen through a moribund history of surrealist imagery. Her œuvre revolves around a series of mise-en-scenes of images of women in popular visual cultures such as advertising, art history and shop mannequins. By using these easily identifiable images of women, Lawther was able to subvert their original intentions and create a new platform from which to represent the female gender.

The exhibition can be divided into two significant groups: those of mannequin figures placed in urban settings; and a second series of images culled from popular and historical representations of women. Both groups of work favoured similar processes of collage techniques. Questions of female identity were evoked where the act of looking at exterior conventions of women's representations was collided with the interior imagination of the artist. A negotiation of surrealist photography themes was also at the fore, grounding the work in a historical critique of the period as well as shedding a new light, a more consciously feminist one, on familiar subjects.

Upon entering the exhibition space the viewer is confronted with an oversized, almost billboard style image of a woman's head. *Medusa's Face* is a woman of indeterminable age, neither young nor old, her eyes are closed and she has an introspective and melancholy expression while her head floats in mid air. Her fragmented image, complying and larger than life, is unable to look, unable to gaze and apprehend. She is caught in another world, that of the imagination. A second *Medusa's Face* consists of a closely cropped image of a woman's chest with a tight bustier at the center of the composition. Her face is shown only from her lips down, depriving us of looking into her eyes and be able to find out what she is really thinking. Both of these images, mounted on aluminum, have an iconic and cool presence, they are modern day Medusa's deprived of their power of the gaze.

In *Narcissist I*, and *Narcissist II*, Lawther pairs the images of dismembered mannequins with bodies of water. *Narcissist II* shows the different parts of a mannequin lounging in front of a round concrete pool. The accompanying image is a painting by the surrealist René Magritte in which a reversed mermaid is lying on a beach. The mermaid, instead of traditionally having a fish's lower body, has a fish's upper body. The sexuality of the mermaid, formerly contained and symbolized by her fish genitalia is put into evidence. Here she is: a female sex without a face, again, a woman without a gaze. This image,



PHOTO: DENIS FAHEY

Margaret Lawther, *Narcissist I and Narcissist II*, 1997.

coupled with Lawther's composition of mannequins, places the mermaid theme within an acutely contemporary setting. In speaking about mermaids, Marina Warner in her book *From the Beast to the Blonde: on Fairy Tales and their Tellers*, says "The siren embodies, in her fascination, the configuration of voice, fate and eros; in classical myth she threatens loss of identity to her victims, and in the fairy tales she is herself erased when she wants to leap out of her in-between-ness and become a full human being". Thus, in *Narcissist II* because the "siren" or mermaid can no longer speak or see, she is deprived of voice and gaze and instead remains with her legs only, hence her sex or various dismembered members of her body.

La Sorcière I combines a drawing by Hans Bellmer coupled with a photograph of a fragmented mannequin placed in a fire place where she is ready to be lit on fire, to be consumed like former witches burned at the stake. The drawing by Bellmer features the face of a young woman constructed entirely of bricks. She is, like the mannequin, made of many parts that can be assembled and disassembled into a multitude of forms. She is mutable, and a construction, albeit, a threatening one.

The mannequins, the discombobulated women, bring to mind the photographic work of Bellmer, but here, the life size doll has been replaced by the store mannequin - a contemporary commodified creation. In Rosalind Krauss' seminal essay *Corpus Delicti* she speaks of the role of Medusa in relation to inanimate dolls in the work of Bellmer. She argues that the doll itself becomes a phallic symbol, thus mimicking the role of the Medusa head as interpreted by Freud wherein her snaked hair is the multiplication of the phallus. Freud also later identifies the snake-haired Medusa with the female genitalia. So, Medusa is the locus of both the male and the female, the castration of the phallus as well as the castrated female genitalia.

The gaze of the Medusa is further explored in *Medusa's Faces* where a series of 12 images culled from popular magazines to fine arts icons are brought together. These images include photographs of Marlene Dietrich, the painting of Ste-Anne by Leonardo da Vinci,

a makeup advertisement, the Gorgon Medusa sculptures, an African woman as represented in the National Geographic, a Dante Gabriel Rossetti woman, and a Katy Keene comic book girl. The women range from the alluring to the grotesque while at the bottom of each image the caption "continued 7" urges us to continue looking from one woman to the next in a never ending flow. Again, these are truncated heads, dismembered representations, which Lawther combines to give the full spectrum of Medusa's gaze. The multiple female heads echo the multiple writhing snakes of Medusa's head. They reference the sexualized role of female representation, where the multiple phalluses (snakes) have been replaced by the multiple female heads. The snakes, and the cut off heads, become one in order to transform them all into an empowering chimera.

The use of surrealist imagery is a useful one for Lawther as it permits her to explore a highly sexualized period of photography and the first avant garde use of the photo medium. By quoting integral players of this period she places herself in relationship to this movement while adding to it with the insertion of her mise-en-scenes of mannequins and her historical excavations.

Lawther succeeds in deconstructing the various ways that the female gaze is manipulated in order to fulfill the role of the Medusa. Lawther's Medusa is still, as Warner says about the siren, in the "in-between-ness" of becoming a full human being, caught somewhere between beast and human. The multiplicity of gazes, of images and representation of women as presented in this exhibition ultimately serve to render Medusa's gaze as a composite of many different women. She incarnates the post-modern model of feminism: existing within the interstices of representation, multiple visions and interpretations. Medusa, in *Méduse Négociée* (embodying the gaze of a decapitated woman that could turn people to stone with her gaze) is unraveled and no longer the specter of an overactive male imagination, she defies history and is not afraid to look you in the eye.

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