

Yes to All

Mar 30 — Sep 8, 2024 | Kunsthal Rotterdam, Rotterdam, Netherlands

In the spring of 2024, Kunsthal Rotterdam is presenting a large-scale exhibition of the work of the Swiss artist Sylvie Fleury (1961, Geneva). For the very first time her extensive oeuvre, which consists of provocative installations, sculptures, ready-mades, and paintings, will be shown in the Netherlands. In a playful way, Fleury challenges the cultural constructs of gender stereotypes. She uses modern advertising strategies such as attention-seeking slogans, brightly coloured neon lights, and seductive presentations to explore the boundaries between contemporary art and consumerism. Incorporating elements from the worlds of fashion and film, pop culture, and art history, Fleury consistently succeeds in creating unexpected new stories, always infused with a generous dose of humour and individuality.

In the 1990s, Sylvie Fleury found fame with her ironic presentations of glamour, fashion, and lifestyle. She still follows the latest trends, loyally reads all the relevant fashion magazines, and never misses the seasonal couture shows in Paris. A fashion victim herself, in her work she responds to the overwhelming influence of the fashion industry by elevating elements from that world to artworks. In the exhibition visitors can imagine themselves to be in a concept store filled with designer goods, Vogue covers, and neon installations with slogans like 'Champagne & Limousines'. By placing luxury goods, accompanied by their seductive sales strategies, in a different context, Fleury is making us aware of the similarities between consumerism and the fashion world. They both capitalise on branding, human desire, and the transience of value.

Objectification of women

Using lively colours, striking materials, and surprising contradictions, Fleury highlights the gender stereotypes and unrealistic beauty ideals that are prevalent in our society. She deconstructs the expectations that we impose on women with regard to their appearance and behaviour, and everything that entails. The exhibition includes vintage aerobics videos by Jane Fonda and a Gucci yoga mat. Make-up plays an important role in her work as well: for instance, Fleury creates larger-than-life-sized eye shadow palettes that, without a matching brush or visible logo, somewhat resemble abstract paintings.

Femininity as a weapon

Destruction is a recurring phenomenon in Fleury's work: she consciously wrecks various objects from the fashion world and pop culture in order to free them from societal constructs or gender clichés. "Sometimes all you need to do is scratch the surface, other times you have to blow it to pieces," says the self-appointed punk feminist in disguise. She literally demonstrates this in a video installation in which a group of women, including the artist, opens fire on 22 iconic Chanel bags. In addition, Fleury transforms products that are stereotypically thought of as feminine into weapons. Examples of this are a bronze cast of a pistol-shaped hairdryer, or a pair of Balenciaga stiletto heels covered in spikes.

Faster, Bigger, Better

In the exhibition Fleury sheds light on the macho culture dominating the world of car racing. The car – as a male status symbol – plays an important role in Fleury's oeuvre. She uses classic American automobiles to crush bottles of foundations and pots of blusher, or covers car wrecks in neon pink Givenchy nail polish. Formula 1 racing is also part of Fleury's universe. She once designed exquisitely executed Formula 1 dresses with matching hand bags in collaboration with Hugo Boss, for instance. By showing neon signs with the text 'Faster, Bigger, Better' and showing videos of loudly accelerating cars, she portrays this masculine sport in a sensual and erotic way. At the same time she draws a parallel to the objectification of the female body.

Walking on Carl Andre

Fleury also satirizes the largely male-dominated art history. Referring to art movements like modernism, minimalism, conceptualism, and pop art, she takes visible pleasure in competing with key figures like Piet Mondrian, Donald Judd, Carl Andre, and Daniel Buren. Fleury links their pretentious works to banal objects, or supplements them with glamorous, soft, and organic elements. She executes Mondrian's famous geometric shapes in fake fur, or gets a variety of women wearing stiletto heels to provocatively parade across Carl Andre's famous floor works. With actions like these, she draws attention to existing patterns in Western art history, such as placing male artists on a pedestal and thereby attaching greater value to their work.

First Spaceship on Venus

Fleury furthermore challenges the idea that space travel is also a male-dominated field. In her work she regularly refers to the cliché that men are from Mars and women are from Venus. Sometimes proudly erect and made of steel, while at other times limp and slumped in the corner, her series First Spaceship on Venus highlights the phallic symbolism of rockets. She subsequently turns these into more 'feminine' objects by executing them in soft materials and lipstick colours, while giving them names like 'Clitonia'. Feminine versus masculine, high versus popular culture, producer versus consumer, and fashion industry versus art world: the Kunsthal will allow visitors to step into the high-contrast universe of Sylvie Fleury.