

Malu Rogers: May I speak?

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A face with its mouth sealed by a wine cork is prevented from speaking what should not be spoken. The title that accompanies the plaster sculpture poses the question: *May I speak?* With no eyes, or speech, this is an anonymous face—a surface with blank holes. In this plastered face, as in Malu Rogers's other works, there is disconcert around the immobility and imprisonment of women within social norms. In her sarcastic commentary about the objectification of women, Malu uses the face as a recurring element in her work, whether in sculptures, drawings, or acrylic paintings. Who do these faces and mouths belong to? What are they trying to say? What rules govern them? What mechanisms of power silence them?

What is seen are noses and mouths of similar shape, following a single standard of beauty. These figures question pre-established constructions about fabricated and programmed bodies. In this universe, individual beauty is diluted within a mechanized and standardized world, where silicone, plastic surgeries, and botoxed lips impose a feminine stereotype. These mass produced faces, like ghosts of themselves, are machines built for seduction and desire. They are uniform, adhering to the same codes of beauty and conduct. These faces are disposable, masked; they are mannequins displayed and for sale like merchandise, objects of consumption following prescribed codes about the female body.

The figures appear like simulations built from a single matrix that shapes and programs them for seduction. They belong to a power mechanism that promotes female seduction to attract both masculine attention and feminine envy—they are objects of desire not just for men, but are also envied by other women who want to be desired by men. By exposing female strategies of seduction as tools of power and control, these faces also expose the tyranny of idealized feminine beauty. These seduction strategies can be tools of female liberation, but they can also be used as means of discipline, creating the illusion of emancipation through an apparatus of subjugation.

Using pop art as inspiration, Malu uses strong, electrifying colors to expose a universe where all is consumption, trade, and seduction. The references to pop art are found not just in her techniques, which incorporate repetition and mechanization, but also in her critique of the commercial. Malu's figures are a sarcastic commentary about the search for beauty for consumption, which is characterized by societal pressures to conform to the conventional standards and demands of feminine beauty. The faces in her works appear happy as a result of masking and manicuring their unhappiness for the sake of performing femininity. According to Jean Baudrillard, "women cannot reasonably trust in the sparkle of their eyes, nor in the softness of their skin: these things they possess do not bring them any certainty. There is a difference between having inherent value by virtue of one's natural qualities and displaying yourself in the best way by subscribing to a model and conforming to a fabricated code."¹

Malu's figures point to situations where female imprisonment has reached its peak, while also questioning the values imposed by a patriarchal society. These critiques are reflected in the title of her works: *Looking to find oneself*, *Patrol*, *In line for the mirror*, *Rescue*, *Counting to ten*, *Disposable*, and *Of the home*. Her figures imagine alternate worlds and dream of leaving behind

¹ Baudrillard, Jean. *The Consumer Society: Myths and Structures*. London, 1998, p. 96. Unofficial translation.

established rules that do not serve them. They appear to believe in the possibility of transforming the morality that governs their society.

As the philosopher Peter Pal Pelbart observed, “When a thinker leaves his clandestine speculations and begins to speak, his voice will sound more hoarse and caustic than it did in his systematic constructions, but it will also be more serene, more tragic, happier.”² In searching for their voices, Malu’s figures seem to want to resist normative impositions and become agents of change. As the writer Tatiana Salem Levy posed, “To resist is to become foreign, a stranger in one’s own culture, it is to become less than, a nomad, exiled, errant.”³ By resisting methods of imprisonment through her figures, Malu searches for new ways of existing, affirming the desire to create a world remote from certainties and truths, a world where everything is yet to come.

² Pelbart, Peter Pal. *Gilles Deleuze: Conversations: 1972-1990*. Sao Paulo, 1992. Unofficial translation.

³ Levy, Tatiana Salem. *A Experiencia do Fora: Blanchot, Foucault e Deleuze*. Rio de Janeiro, 2011, p. 137. Unofficial translation.