

## Alexis Teplin's 'play her armour A'

Fragonard features prominently in this installation and Catherine Deneuve and Marcello Mastroianni also have an important role to play. Like the era that gave us first the crinoline and then the guillotine, we remember the sixties as much as anything for the clothes and certain images, of which Deneuve's and Mastroianni's are two. (The music and philosophy are also pretty good in both the eighteenth century and the nineteen-sixties.) I think this show is about Alexis Teplin's idea of what's actually straightforwardly exciting in the sense of what appeals (almost) directly to the senses rather than to ones recognition of references to historical epochs, except inasmuch as it's the epochs that bring in the (almost).

As Norman Bryson has put it, Fragonard paints the world of the *ancien régime* as one in which the landscape is supported by air rather than rock. Alexis used to paint such landscapes, I'm pretty sure before she'd met Norman but maybe not before she'd started to get off on Fragonard. Hers were landscapes made out of fabric. You'd be looking at the something which could be a landscape or it could be a view from within a bed, and I think it is fabric which continues to provide the structural inspiration for the work as a whole.

Fabric, that is to say, considered at all times in conjunction with colour and often with paint. Fabric is a surface which can be a covering but has no inside of its own, like paint. In this show fabric is the pre-condition of several effects. One is of softening through covering—a wall covered in felt. Another is of covering but at the same time sculpting—an eighteenth century hat, also a sculpture made out of a sleeve. Another is of a support which can disappear—stretched canvas—and another its correlative, the semi-stretched canvas. In the stretched canvas fabric is a ground for all sorts of spatial intension and extension that contradict it, in the semi-stretched panorama it is not so much a ground as another field of movements which parallel but don't mimic those caused by colour and brush-strokes, of which one may also say that whereas her earlier work tended to make colour and line make movements which resembled those made by fabric—a surface with two sides articulated through folds and creases—she has long since moved on to make paint create movements which are sometimes like liquid and at others more wholly spatial, ungrounded by definition and no longer connected to any idea of a surface. Fabric runs through the show and sometimes colour is continuous with the surface with which it's identified and sometimes it isn't. When it is it's because the colour is the colour of a material and when it isn't, but instead creates a spatial distension, it's because it isn't. The colour on the photographs of Deneuve and Mastroianni should probably be considered in the light of both analogy and difference.

Given that this note is displayed in a box or vitrine, like a newspaper in Russia during the Soviet era or the letter from the Queen they have up in the faculty dining room at the Royal College of Art, I must keep this short. According to Richard Martin a seamstress during the *ancien régime* was supposed to be able to incorporate all the crinoline she was given into the dress without having any more left over than she could conceal in her fist, and I think Alexis is that kind of artist. The result is one which combines care with excess or at least extremism. The gallery is repainted and otherwise adjusted. Everything is internally complex—there are no works in the show that aren't made out of several moves, first reason or at least second reason to take it seriously—and also in a relationship which may or may not be complicated to the show as a whole. It's all very sexy certainly and this I think is where one can say something brief but to the point about the triangulation Fragonard/Deneuve and Mastroianni/Alexis Teplin's world view.

As I've implied, everything in the show is active. There isn't any dead space, covering and painting walls is a way of making sure that there is nothing that doesn't signify. The work clearly has a lot to do with the concept of style but as I've said I'd encourage the viewer to think rather of sensibility—of sensation as a matter of the bodily and involuntary rather than of convention and connotation. Because it's to the point that the Fragonard that Alexis really likes is the rather impatient and quite thick paint Fragonard of the portraits of not-too-important people rather than the thoroughly thin big decorative paintings of dirty old men and girls on swings. It's that Fragonard that pre-conditions a lot of the brush work in this show, and is I think not unrelated to the sense in which there's plenty of disjunction but never any dysfunction in Alexis' work. It's sexy because it's intense and playful but also because it manages to

be highly finished without inducing calm. It has less to do with style as a matter of conventions than with the sensory intensification that the latter enables.

Fragonard—once one gets past the bits that art historians want to talk about—represents a world constituted exclusively of pleasure. That's the art history that you get in Teplin. One may surely make a comparable claim about the image of Catherine Deneuve, and doubtlessly Marcello Mastroianni's too. Deneuve and Mastroianni are both icons of stylishness and poise which excite rather than quieten. They do not yet belong to art or cultural history as completely as does Fragonard, but instead have a more immediate past life as the beginning of the present because they belong to the sixties. The sixties are generally undergoing a revival because they are slipping from being the parents' to the grandparents' generation, after which they fall into the unreachable distance trough with Fragonard and all the others. This is their last moment in the present. They appear in Teplin's present as icons of the poised and, so it seems to me, of the irresistible in the sense of that which seduces automatically and therefore doesn't have to be actively seductive. And that said I'll make—in quite an eighteenth-century sort of way—a recommendation about how to look at the work

I thought it was just me but it turns out that theory in general can't talk about love but rather always takes refuge in adjacent and ancillary categories like seduction—to which I've already had recourse—desire, lust, flirtation. I've already done it here and shall now do some more of it. The viewer should think about force and concentration as these occur within the experience of the pleasurable. Deleuze talks about a scene in a film as one in which a man does not so much get up from a chair and move towards the bed as he is carried there by lust. 'Lust' may not be the right word but force that is generalised but at the same time propels is what should be in one's mind when looking at the panorama and also when taking into account the felt wall. Flirtation is quite inseparable from concentration because it requires that the attention be riveted for an indefinite period of potentially infinite extension. That is the kind of concentration that's required by the ostrich feathers, the woods out of which the sculpture's plinth is made and the Schiaparelli pink velvet. All this has to do with desire as a condition of the desirable, a generalised state of volition—a force—synonymous with pleasure as a kind of looking. That would be looking which precludes any but aesthetic criticality—as in Fragonard and surely rather differently in Deneuve and Mastroianni. As ever the viewer's difficulty will be in separating the right way to look at the work from the base desire to situate it as a practice within the world of contemporary art. I only bring it up so that I may encourage you to forget about that at least for now, it's a wholly unnecessary distraction not least given that the work's importance is in any case self-evident.

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