

LUCY MITCHELL-INNES IN CONVERSATION WITH MARTHA ROSLER

Art Basel Unlimited 2022

Martha Rosler began *Body Beautiful, or Beauty Knows No Pain* in the mid-1960s and continued the series until 1972. Mitchell-Innes & Nash and Galerie Nagel Draxler are delighted to present, for the first time, the full set of photomontages and original collages.

LUCY MITCHELL-INNES: What made you decide to start making this group of work? What motivated you?

MARTHA ROSLER: It was the mid-1960s and women were agitating. One of the things they were agitating about, aside from every single thing about women's lives, was the issue of the visual representation of women in magazines and ads. I blinked twice, and I thought, "That's right!"

I had already made two very large collages: one called *Greetings* and another called *International City*. The former was made around the time of the 1964 presidential election between Barry Goldwater and Lyndon B. Johnson. There were a lot of men shaking hands and I used Cray-Pas, a kind of oil-based crayon, to put makeup on these prominent male figures. There are also female figures in ceremonial rituals and generally static posts. (The other image was about the globalization of cities built according to High Modernist principles.)

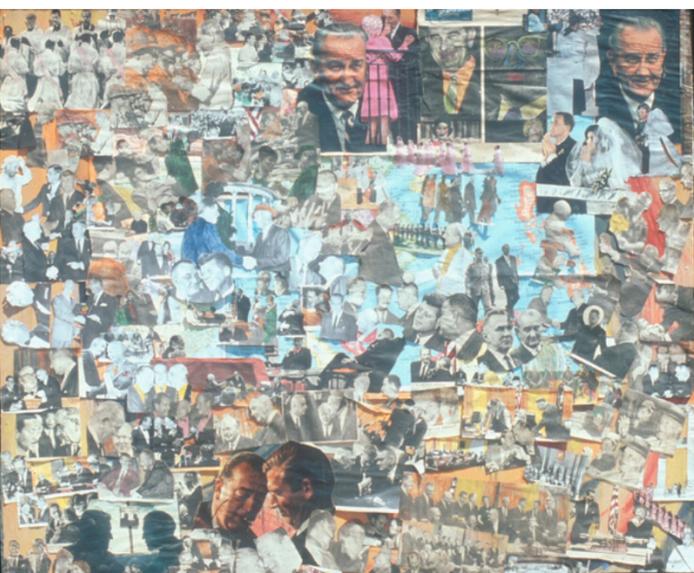


Figure 1

I was, of course, generally concerned about forms of representation of both men and women. Every Sunday, I would get *The New York Times*—like everybody else in my known universe—and turn to its large-format, glossy magazine. It was full of "serious" articles, accompanied by full-page ads with female models, many in "baby-doll" type pajamas or sucking their thumbs, presented as sexualized infants, or as pouty creatures,

and so on. In other words, it was full of women who I thought of as bedroom appliances. So, I thought, "Okay, I have to deal with this."

One of the earliest of the images I made along these lines was *Joan of Arc*, which includes a Jules Bastien-Lepage painting from the Metropolitan Museum in New York. In the collage are a tiny 19th-century tintype with a women's portrait, some stickers and other images from the Victorian era, and a Tiffany glass vase from the Met's collection. I was very interested in making the connection to Victoriana; the Bastien-Lepage painting is also from the same period, in which women's agitation for political and social rights was met with widespread misogyny, including in the arts. Soon after, I made *Motherhood Fantasy* and *Hunting Fantasy*, which also have Victorian stickers of birds and flowers to suggest a kind of sentimentalized stasis. Women are lovely, women are colorful, women are flowers—but women are also stuck.



Figure 2



Figure 3

LMI: Let me ask about the more pornographic images.

MR: I made the collages in stages—I made a few and then I made a few others. Among the ones I made in San Diego, some have source material that included black and white pornography. San Diego is a port city and is home to one of our major naval fleets, the Pacific fleet. The sailors would come to town and go to brothels and bars and also, it seems, buy little pornographic photos. So, I bought some of those photo cards and they appear in *A Secret Place*, *Isn't It Nice* and *Bianchi Bride*. Most of the pornographic black and white images I used are from those little “filthy” pictures.

On the other hand, I used many images from the leading pornographic magazine of the era, *Playboy*—which today we are careful to call “soft core,” in contrast to other, far less publicly acceptable magazines. They include what I think were the last group I made, centered on kitchen appliances, which I almost withheld from the public because I thought they were so crude: the kitchen, the stove, the refrigerator, the dishwasher.

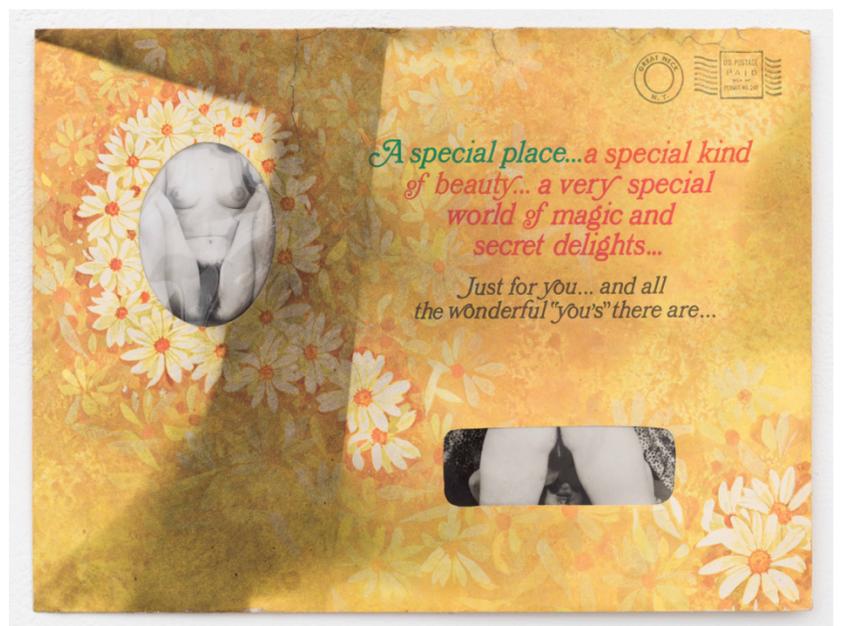


Figure 4

LMI: We see the range of the ways of seeing women or women's roles—works like *Cold Meat*, *Hot Meat* and *Miss February* being particularly misogynistic views of women.

MR: Well, there's no escaping it in those works because they isolate parts of the body and fill the frame with them. There are a couple of others, like *Wallpaper*—it's also one of the later images—that also are outrageous. The fully dismembered images are from *Playboy*, as is *Miss February*—and the body parts are from one of the centerfolds, but they're pasted onto the kind of cheap contact paper you put on kitchen surfaces to simulate wood grain.



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7

LMI: You were talking about *Miss February*, as source material that came from the Playboy Magazine every month, with an actual centerfold.

MR: Well, they were trifolds, in fact, stapled in the magazine center, and the model was always titled Miss whatever the month was. So that's Miss February, and that's the title of the artwork.

LMI: And you severed her head so she was even more objectified, I suppose.

MR: Yes. The head was the upper third of the centerfold.

LMI: Elaborate. You cut the edge of that collage with pinking shears, as I recall.

MR: Yes. She's fully cut out and placed onto a background of cloth, which I cut with pinking shears. I used cloth in a couple of the images.

LMI: To refer to women's work. Is that right?

MR: Yeah, and women's milieu and context.

LMI: When I saw the collages for the first time, I was very struck by the differences in scale from the collages to the decisions you made at the end as to what was going to be large and what was going to be small. It's clearly an important decision that you made. For example, the cut out for *Cargo Cult* is quite small and *Motherhood Fantasy* is quite large in comparison.

MR: Let's remember, this is long before Photoshop and you worked with what you had. So, the canvas I had was the basic image. Almost all of them have a foundational image, which is the stepping-off point for transformation. For example, *Old Bride* is a bridal party from the Pop era and I simply cut out the head of an older woman from a medical magazine and plopped her on the bride.

There are two works in which I simply messed with the advertisement. In *To Compete with the Noonday Sun*, where the people on the beach are sunbathing, the women are exposing their breasts and genitals.

In *De Tomaso Pantera*, parts of the car are transformed into sex scenes. These works had to be printed at about the size of magazine pages. This applies as well to *Vacuuming Pop Art* and, of course, the ads for lingerie, like *Transparent Box* or *Isn't It Nice?*.

Cargo Cult, to me, was about a subject that was looming very large, and the image had to convey something of the scale of what is happening in the image. There was no question in my mind that it had to be pretty big. It needed the scope of its content. The same is true of *Jumping Janes*, which is straight out of a travel magazine. It is about landscape so it should be large. The figures came from a spread about women exercising and, in particular, exercising postpartum. *Hothouse, or Harem* is a historic subject and deserved plenty of space, allowing the eye to wander through it, and to use the images of the women at the size in which they actually appeared on the magazine pages.



Figure 8

LMI: To go back to *Cargo Cult*, you're saying that you felt the subject was looming large and so the photomontage needed to be large?

MR: Yes. The image centers on globalization. The globalization of a particular look in women's cosmeticized beauty and its relation to the globalization of goods transport in general. The women of the world learned to wear makeup the way American cosmetics companies determined women should look. Advertising travels globally alongside physical objects. Women's magazines have national issues all pushing the same products.

Cargo Cult is very much an image about labor. It's easy to see that it's about image construction: women constructing their faces. For me, that's invisible labor. There's also the invisible labor of the men, whom I did not remove from the image—I made sure that these men, Black men, who were guiding the load remained in the image. Nobody looking at this has ever asked me, "Who are those guys?" The question of labor, and the invisibility of labor, runs through this series, as does the important idea of the invisibility of that which is plainly visible—which also figures in the antiwar images I have made. We see but don't grasp the whole picture.

LMI: In your image of the *Old Bride*, are you referring to the inevitable aging of women?

MR: Yes, exactly. That women as we age are not going to look like the young women in *Cargo Cult*. Women are not represented as anything but social objects without agency when they're old (or they're mocked as witches). This work was made the mid-1960s when there were almost no women in public life and women over, say, twenty-five were commonly derided as old hags and as outdated, dried up, used up. Certainly, if older women were to be presented as brides it wouldn't be in the virginal white dress with the lovely best man and lovely maid of honor. The typical bridal image in particular is a celebration of sexuality and respectability combined.

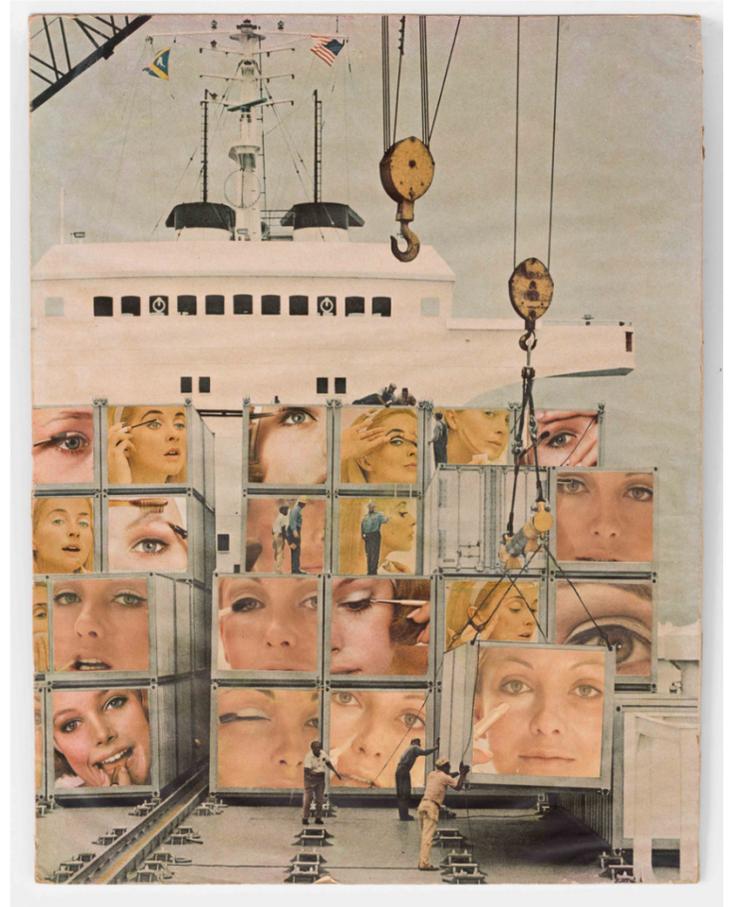


Figure 9

LMI: That seems particularly true when I look an image like *Bicillin*, or *Medical Treatment II* and thinking about the ownership of women's bodies. Here we are back with Roe vs. Wade under the gun and the work is really timely in a kind of scary way.

MR: Yes! We always knew it would come back. Of course, with everything that occurs on a slow scale, like global warming, we say, "Later for that. It can't really happen. We have to lead our lives. I have to take out the garbage, I need to buy a new lipstick or a piece of meat for dinner or shoes for the kids." We're not worrying about access to healthcare, access to reproductive rights, the ability to live in the increasingly unlivable environment we're creating. And the presence of a sexualized woman always changes the subject to desire, narrowing it down to that alone. But the presence of even a more ordinary-looking woman anchors meaning in its own way—to domesticity, perhaps, and being, say, house proud.

If you look at *Vacuuming Pop Art*, it is, if nothing else, about a woman who is an extension of a modern household appliance in the midst of art that was considered the last word on representation—in particular, Tom Wesselmann's painting of a gigantic Pop Art female head.

There's glamor in that image but the real woman's activity is confined to keeping the highly decorated space clean and neat. The image of passivity and availability and compliance was prominent in representations of women in the 1950s and 1960s. That changed somewhat after the women's movement. Subsequently, however, perfume and lingerie ads, and more, ramped up the presentation of women as sexually available and seemingly high on drugs, and advertising in general crept back toward relying on sexy and often very young models.



Figure 10

LMI: And what about *Oil Slick*?

MR: That one centers an ecological theme; it's called *Oil Slick* because there is an unclothed young woman dreaming away while floating in an oil spill. Despite the title, I think it has no immediate resonance as an ecological disaster because the sheen of oil on polluted water is simply the backdrop for a stereotypically attractive and seemingly available Playboy model—but her backdrop is an image of pollution nonetheless, whose realization can be said to be blocked by sexual desire.

And then there is *Bathroom Surveillance or Vanity Eye*, but who is the object of the gaze? It is ambiguous. It's a woman's eye, so one imagines, and I think rightly, that the woman is doing the gazing. The mirror shows a giant, ideal cosmeticized eye and thus it should be reflecting the woman herself. But truly, it's an aggressively large woman's eye looking out at any viewer of the image. The mirror represents the woman's narcissism, perhaps, but it also represents her labor on behalf of the gaze of others. So there's a level of immediacy and then a metalevel of ambiguity.

LMI: It makes me think of surrealism.

MR: I trace my work in many ways to Berthold Brecht, for whom a basic principle was the “making strange” of the ordinary. But certainly in major respects my work harks back to various earlier surrealist trends. Panoramas by the San Francisco artist Jess impressed me greatly, and Max Ernst was an immediate influence. I was also influenced at a very early age by various Futurist works—their use of space and the transformation of objects was a big deal for me. At the Museum of Modern Art in New York, I saw Futurists like Giacomo Balla—I wrote a high school paper on his work. I was riveted by the works of the Italian and Belgian surrealists, among whom I'd include James Ensor, and Salvador Dalí of course, as well as Pavel Tschelitchew, who was at the other end within his grotesque, almost hysterical images, but whose work was hanging in the same room as Dalí's. And *Small Wonder* is a clear reference to Man Ray, a different kind of surrealist.

LMI: I think the way you fiddle with scale also comes from a surrealist sensibility.

MR: Yes. That and various forms of doubling in my work brings to mind the psychological principle of dreamwork.

LMI: You have two self-portraits in the series.

MR: That's right, but I'm not in one of the self-portraits. The basic image is from a medical magazine. *Self Portrait I* features a Polaroid of myself in sunglasses in front of a car, and a modern, hideous Pop-like interior. I love all the mirrors in that image—the whole wall is mirrors, a popular interior décor idea at one point. Along that line, I've also used some very potent movie images of Marilyn Monroe and Rita Hayworth in rooms so mirror-laden you have trouble locating them. The mirrored room is about women's duplicity: you can't locate the actual person because it's all smoke and mirrors, minus the smoke. "Women are all reflections. There's no substance. Yeah, isn't that true?" We are creatures with no substance. You could go through a year's worth of magazines today and I think you'd be astonished at how little has changed. There is a certain sadistic irony that they reimpose on us.

We have finally discovered that history has been erased. That's one of the facets of the postmodern era: that everything can become a jumble of signifiers and not anything stable, particularly no historical stability or coherent line of argument. Thus the past ceases to inform the present without great difficulty. Last week I was walking around New York with a young curator and she said, "Look at all the exposed flesh on women! Everyone is showing their midriff." And I said, "Don't you remember that?"—from the last time we dressed like that, supposedly as a matter of choice. We both kind of shrugged.

LMI: I think there's a different attitude. Women feel empowered.

MR: Perhaps, but are we?

LMI: That's a good question. I think that's the right question to end on.

All images © Martha Rosler unless otherwise noted

Figure 1: Greetings, 1965, pasted paper collage

Figure 2: Jules Bastien-Lepage, Joan of Arc, 1879, oil on canvas, 100 by 110 in. 254 by 279.4 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Figure 3: Joan of Arc, c. 1966-72, pasted paper collage, 11 by 8 3/8 in. 27.9 by 21.3 cm.

Figure 4: A Special Place, c. 1966-72, pasted paper collage, 8 1/4 by 11 in. 21 by 27.9 cm.

Figure 5: Kitchen I, or Hot Meat, c. 1966-72, pasted paper collage, 4 7/8 by 3 1/8 in. 12.4 by 7.9 cm.

Figure 6: Cold Meat II, or Kitchen II, c. 1966-72, photomontage

Figure 7: Centerfold, or Miss February, c. 1966-72, pasted paper and fabric collage, 22 by 14 in. 55.9 by 35.6 cm.

Figure 8: Hothouse, or Harem, c. 1966-72, pasted paper collage, 18 by 44 in. 45.7 by 111.8 cm.

Figure 9: Cargo Cult, c. 1966-72, pasted paper collage, 13 by 10 1/8 in. 33 by 25.5 cm.

Figure 10: Vacuuming Pop Art, c. 1966-72, pasted paper collage, 9 3/8 by 9 1/2 in. 23.8 by 24.1 cm.