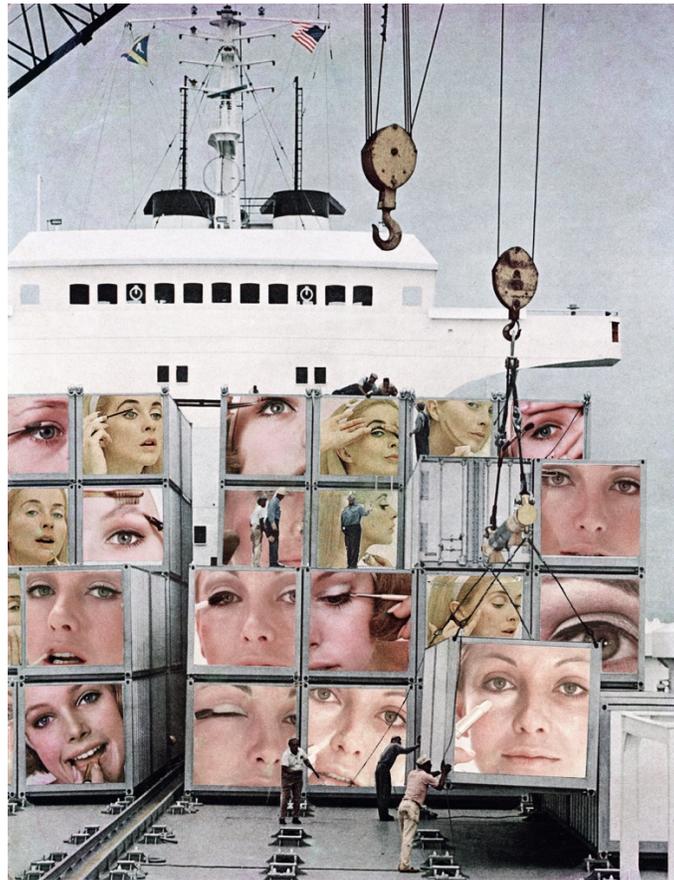


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The Cutting Cleverness of Martha Rosler's Collages

The feminist artist's early photomontages from the 1960s and '70s present a world both striking and deeply familiar in its critique of patriarchy and consumerism.

January 13, 2023 | By Lucy McKeon



Martha Rosler, *Cargo Cult*, from the series *Body Beautiful, or Beauty Knows No Pain*, ca. 1966–72

When I was a teenager, I would create collages from women's magazines like *Vogue* and *Elle* by cutting out the images I was drawn to and gluing them into new formations on computer paper. Strange and, to me, beautiful scenes came of this practice, this instinct to disassemble and reassemble visual aspects of the modern world—particularly women's bodies, objectified and disaggregated in order to sell things. I particularly remember a collage made only from eyes—a hundred different irises, pupils, and lashes arranged in a kind of altarpiece to seeing, staring back at me.

The photomontages on view at [Martha Rosler: Changing the Subject... in the Company of Others](#), at Mitchell-Innes & Nash in New York through January 21, are at once striking and deeply familiar, whether you've seen them before or not. Made between 1966 and 1972, the works from Rosler's series *Body Beautiful, or Beauty Knows No Pain*, convey a radical and playful feminist analysis of advertising that has by now become conventional wisdom. In *Cold Meat I* and *II*, refrigerators hold red buttocks and breasts in addition to the usual suburban provisions; in *Transparent Box, or Vanity Fair* and *Isn't it Nice...*, or *Baby Dolls* models advertising lingerie are overlaid with breasts, lips, and pubis—the real products. *Pop Art, or Wallpaper* takes this critique to its natural conclusion with a medley of disembodied women's body parts organized almost like butterflies, sorted by genus and pinned to wood, limbs lined up to the point of abstraction. The show's inclusion of preparatory constructions and drafts of some of the works that hang on the walls suggests the humble tactility of Rosler's project: one can imagine her sifting through the magazines of the day, scissors glinting.

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Left: Martha Rosler, *Transparent Box* or *Vanity Fair*, from the series *Body Beautiful, or Beauty Knows No Pain*, ca. 1966–72. Right: Martha Rosler, *Bowl of Fruit*, from the series *Body Beautiful, or Beauty Knows No Pain*, ca. 1966–72



Left: Martha Rosler, *Bathroom Surveillance*, or *Vanity Eye*, from the series *Body Beautiful, or Beauty Knows No Pain*, ca. 1966–72. Right: Martha Rosler, *Pop Art*, or *Wallpaper*, from the series *Body Beautiful, or Beauty Knows No Pain*, 1966–72

There's a cutting cleverness to Rosler's collages, a dark wit that might as easily veer into horror, like laughing hysterics tipping over to tears. While the models, with their orange tans and full bosoms rendered in the washed-out vibrancy of film at the time, insist on their 1960s provenance, they also advertise a story out of time. Like Christian saint martyrs depicted holding their own body parts as proof of their purity (Saint Lucy holding her eyes, Saint Agatha her breasts), these women are dismembered and rearranged by Rosler in order to expose the primacy of this mandate: that to be good is to be disembodied. What if wholeness could be achieved not through the purchase of a bra or dishwasher, but some other way?

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Martha Rosler, *Nature Girls (Jumping Janes)*, from the series *Body Beautiful, or Beauty Knows No Pain*, ca. 1966–72

In *House Beautiful: The Colonies* (1969–72), Rosler critiques Cold War–era competition with the Soviet Union. These works are reminiscent of her series *House Beautiful: Bringing the War Home* (1967–72), in which *House & Garden*–style magazine spreads showcasing lavish homes are infiltrated by images from the Vietnam War, scenes of violence and horror wrought by America’s fear of Communism, of having our things taken from us. “I saw the clear reference to the home itself as being central to our ideology of why we were fighting people abroad,” Rosler has said, pointing also to all the ways in which imperialism and colonialism might be understood in tandem with patriarchy.



Installation views of *Martha Rosler: Changing the Subject... in the Company of Others*, Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York, 2022–23

There are a few comics and conceptual works on view as well. Selected works of sculpture and installation include *Diaper Pattern* (1973–75), where cloth diapers are scrawled with xenophobic and anti-Vietnam sentiments. A grassy airplane’s outline on the ground called *B-52 in Baby’s Tears* (1972) is a bit ineffectually overt. In *Objects With No Titles* (1971–73), lingerie and children’s clothing are stuffed and hanging, ghostly comical disruptions of the idealized female form found in advertisements across the gallery. Nearby, atop a mini mattress, a slip is outfitted with a mechanism and audio to simulate the rise and fall of breath.

Later installations and videos, like *A Gourmet Experience* (1974) and *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975)—in which Rosler, humorously deadpan, demonstrates the uses of various kitchen items to ridiculous and even violent ends—critique the domestic space. But here, the power of Rosler’s vision is best conveyed in her photomontages: a cutting apart and putting back together to analyze the patriarchal uncanny—exposing the violence and vanity, the unfreedom and absurdity of the way things are. Like Saint Lucy both holding her gouged out eyes while seeing through those planted firmly in her head, this rearranging—the reclamation that is collage—creates the perspective of a sight regained after it’s been taken.

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Martha Rosler, Still from *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, 1975. Black and white video, sound, 6 minutes, 35 seconds. All works courtesy the artist and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York.

“It points to the compartmentalization that people are used to producing in how we live our lives,” Rosler has said of her work on American wars fought abroad. But her words could as easily point to a range of disassociations and divisions—almost three years into a global pandemic it’s never been clearer how inextricable are our fates, how fundamental our collective reliance, how we resist it at our own peril. This habit of disassembly “prevents us from being a whole society and from being whole individuals,” Rosler says. “We are not a here and a there. We are all one, and this is crucial.”

Martha Rosler: Changing the Subject... in the Company of Others is on view at Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York, through January 21, 2023.