

Epilogue: The Collages

After a passage of time the photographs are transformed again. Having received the finished prints from Mr. Rudisill, Ms. Nessim uses them as cutups to create a new series of work. She recomposes the model's face, and whole gestures are born of curves, squares and rectangular slices of cutouts from magazines portraying women in fashion.

Ms. Nessim has collected these for years, keeping separate plastic bags full of noses, eyes and lips. Unlike the collage artist Fred Tomaselli's blowups of digitally filed cutouts, Ms. Nessim directly glues her cuttings onto Mr. Rudisill's photographs, which serve as backgrounds. The cutout elements that make up the composite are kept to a minimum, maybe three or four in number – but they are carefully chosen and positioned by subtle means to transform the model's identity in dramatic ways.

The uniformity in flesh tones and the atonal backdrops of the original headshots enable the series of collages to retain their visual continuity. There is an occasional flash of lipstick-red and cellophane-green, for example in the cinematic heroine and femme fatale in *Runway Runner*, and in the temptress with forbidden fruit in *Just Bite*, but in both the eyes and lips, either voluptuous or sullen, remain abstract. And though the focus on jewelry in particular is feminine, the portraits have a metallic, asexual quality that sets the viewer as voyeur, a reminder that fashion *is* advertising.

At first glimpse, and by force of habit, one is taken in by the surface renditions of women as they appear in magazines, glamourized, art directed, artificially styled and bedecked in splendour. The model's body is a showcase, dripping with gemstones. She scintillates like a beacon to entice us. On her body she promotes merchandise. These manikins of flesh are subsumed by the jewelry they carry.

But Ms. Nessim challenges the fatigued eye – bringing to the fore in caricature, the flash of a red nail, the coquette's lips, an emblem of pearls, as strongly iconic as the cigarette holder or the rakishly tipped hat in their metaphors of seduction: She exposes the industry prescribed attributes of beauty by dissecting the fixtures of femininity. In the first series of collages (*Ancient Beauty*, *Just Bite*), the women retain their feminine allure. But later, they break free of their trappings, their correspondence to conventional beauty, and disassemble. They are disturbing in the mélange of deconstructed parts. The sinister leaf-like eye, at the center of a whorl of petals, menaces, and yet is imbued with mystique, drawing from a more enigmatic source of beauty. In the exploding body we see the misplaced eye, the slightly threatening, ravenous lips, revealing perhaps a tyrannical dimension to fashion (*In Vision*, *Dream Still*, *Young Icon*). They bring to mind Max Ernst's magical scenarios in *Une Semaine De Bonté*, each with an obscure but tantalizing theme, but they stop short of a narrative, being fixed in time like images from magazines, perfect and freestanding of themselves.

The jewelry too, weaves a motif of undulating forms: the wave of pearls in *In Vision* is mimicked in rippling shadow under the reclining head of *Runway Runner*, or as a ring around the arm - to form a whimsical tattoo. The jewelry dangles with implication - in a noose of pearls in *Just Bite*, and is a restrictive collar around the neck in *Dream Still*. Together as a series the figures draw from both modern and classical archetypes. The androgynous figures in *Historical Glance* and *Beyond the Pale* are as classically iconic with their laurel wreaths as the *Young Icon* or the 'Bond-girl' in *Runway Runner* - is contemporary, with her accessory of dice.

A blend of negative and positive spaces conflates depth: Is the face peering out of the mouth or is the mouth devouring the face? The illusion between foreground and background is further accentuated by the flattening onto metal substrates. The reflective quality of the surface adds opulence and ethereality to the finished pieces, completing this eloquent collaboration between artist and photographer.

Essay by Kiša Lala, July 2009

Kiša Lala writes for art publications and websites, and has written prose in collaboration with many visual artists.