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Metamorphosis of Failure

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Think about Paul Gauguin. His portraits presenting native peoples are probably carved in your mind. Women with coffee-colored skin stare at you, immersed in undefined thoughts. You don't really know who they are, you don't really know how they feel. They are just subject. The subject of the artist's vision. This is the point of departure of *Metamorphosis of Failure*, a film and photography project by **Rachelle Mozman Solano**. In 2014 she visited the Museum of Modern Art's exhibition of Paul Gauguin's works on paper made in the South Pacific toward the end of his life and was impressed by the mythology perpetuated by the museumography and curation, particularly the

narrative about Gauguin's work based on identity transformation during his immersion in Polynesian culture. Mozman Solano decides to go deep in it and explore the figure of the super renowned artist, his background and the less known unpleasant aspects of his life, empowering the women he used to portray by imagining an alternative narrative that exposes Gauguin's internal conflict and the desires that he projected onto his subjects.

We interviewed Rachelle to know more about the project.

Let's start from the beginning: *Metamorphoses*, the exhibition at MOMA featuring prints and sculptures of Paul Gauguin while living in Polynesia, left a mark on your mind. Why?

Reading the book *Noa Noa* and the letters he published, I felt immediately that the narrative Gauguin told himself of his work and life living in Polynesia was a story rooted in fantasy. I felt he projected this fantasy onto his subjects; a story about being immersed amongst a people that were primitive, racially pure, and more animal than man. Gauguin claimed that this time in Polynesia had impacted and changed his art and his identity. I began researching and was surprised to learn Gauguin was of mixed identity. His mother was Peruvian and he had spent several of his formative years living in Peru. I began to look at his work as that of a person in conflict with his dual identity and a possible reason for his obsession with racial purity.

Your project analyses the figure of Gauguin as a man rather than as an artist. What did you learn about him?

The more research I did, the more I felt that Gauguin desire to reconstruct his identity was based on his desire to feel a personal and sexual freedom he seemed to equate to "primitive" cultures. Aside from being narcissistic, abusive, and maybe sociopathic, he was obsessed with racial purity and any mixing of identity meant a loss of "authenticity" for him. This is interesting because he himself would have been unauthentic under these parameters and this seems to me like a rejection of himself. I felt he projected this fantasy onto his subjects, throughout his writing he speaks of being disappointed with subjects who showed any sign of racial mixing, because it would not "teach him any of the things" he "wished to know". What these "things" were, I can only imagine were rooted in a racism and feeling that these people were closer to "animality" and the less mixed they were the more they could teach him to be closer to "animality" too.

What do you think about the way he represented women?

In his paintings and drawings women are often nude or in a pose that suggests submissiveness. There is a subtle reference to sexuality in much of the work. I was not able to separate his portrayals of these women with what I knew to be his relationships

to them through his writing. For instance in a scene from Noa Noa he describes watching women from afar bath nude in a body of water and compares them to a herd of wild animals. In another scene he describes having left his young “wife” alone in the dark and upon returning finding her naked and in a state of intense fear for an evil spirit. He painted this scene and I wondered, was this a sadistic wish? Was he the evil spirit? It’s hard to separate out his ability for myth making and reality. I was curious by the portrayals of women where a devil like male figure appears because I came to believe that this symbolically represented him. In his writings he speaks about the devil figure repeatedly as being imagery that came from Polynesian spiritual tradition, which I don’t believe to be completely true or not how he came to understand or describe it.

In my photographs and in the film I was really interested in my own fantasy of Gauguin making work in Panama, with Panamanian women who are not racially pure and who have a history of dealing with pirates, Spanish colonizers and then the US government building a canal. In my work I imagined these women not being subjugated easily by his desire to portray or shape them in his fantasy. The women in my work are at first ambivalent, and latter, they turn into image-maker’s stealing his camera and becoming artists with the power to represent themselves. In my fantasy his subjects are empowered.

And what about today? How are women represented?

Today there may be more conversation around how we represent women particularly amongst women, but I don’t feel things have changed in any real way. Unfortunately women have internalized societies sexism to the point that many women will represent themselves in a way that exhibits this internalized sexism if given a chance. The concept of dual consciousness can apply to this subject because it’s about having internalized the way other’s perceive you and then playing out this role, and maybe coming to see yourself in this way too even if it means you are being subjugated and objectified. I am fascinated by the fact that when I make portraits of women in Panama for example, they intuitively strike poses that speak to this internalized sexism. It’s the internalized voice that so many women have.

I really like the soft tones of the images you create, it’s a kind of dreamy atmosphere. What were you inspired by?

I have always been drawn to the work of Gauguin because it represented subjects who have historically been under represented in art and I also have always admired his use of color and shape. On the other hand my dislike for how he perceived his subjects and his feeling of superiority makes me unable to enjoy the work. So it was important for me to directly reference his color palette and a kind of dream or floating quality in how his subjects inhabit space. There are a lot of pinks, purples and reds in his work. In making the film and photographs I was looking at a lot of his work and also looking at Panamanian indigenous textile design. It was the combination of the two that brought

about the choice in color and set design. I used a lot of Panamanian textile in making the sets and the costumes. I was interested in my actors appearing as though they were in a floating dream like space. The sound was also overdubbed to emphasize this feeling.

You grew up in New York from immigrant parents. I feel there's something autobiographical in this work as well.

My interest in Gauguin's internal conflict around his dual identity does speak to my interest in duality and triality of identities, and this drive speaks to my own family history of multiple identities, on the side of my mother's Caribbean family as well of the union between my parents. In my previous work made with my mother I attempted to address the complexity of this duality and triality of identities in the Caribbean. In many ways the project on Gauguin is a continuity of this fascination. I also see this work as biographical in that I have worked for years making portraits using a camera. Reflecting on how I come to represent my subjects and how photography and art in general represents people is very much something I think about. I was fascinated to learn that Gauguin used photography in making his paintings. On the other hand, Gauguin's struggle to reinvent himself by attempting to construct a false narrative or a fantastical narrative by employing the culture of at first Panama, then Polynesia, is something very different from my own experience. I do find myself fascinated by people, particularly artists that are looking to reshape their identity. In the case of Gauguin, I was interested in how he perceived and ultimately used people in a narcissistic possibly sociopathic way to portray a fantasy of himself and a culture through his art.

Gauguin is certainly an interesting subject, but your project speaks about a lot of things beyond him, isn't it?

I feel the project addresses issues of how we artists represent our subjects and a discussion around the history of representation. In photography, representing others in cultures not one's own can be tricky and there is a long history of photography getting it wrong in the relationship between subject and photographer or being flat out racist. This project also speaks to the history of colonization and the way that the other perceived under colonization. Ultimately the project is about perception and how when we represent others, and more so, people unlike us, what comes out is our own projections and our own fantasies.

Metamorphosis of Failure is on show at Smack Mellon (Brooklyn, NY) until 24 February 2019.

