

WOMEN ARE AN OPAQUE IMAGE. DEFINITION EVADES US CONSTANTLY, SLIPPING THROUGH THE FINGERS OF HISTORY AS IT IS SIMULTANEOUSLY BEING LIVED AND TRANSFORMED THROUGH THE FACT OF THAT LIVING. DESPITE A LACK OF AGREEMENT ON CRITERIA, "WOMAN" IS A SOCIAL IMPERATIVE AND A MECHANISM OF POLITICAL DISCIPLINE. THE WORLD SHOUTS *BE HER, BE HER, BE HER* ONLY TO HATE HER WHEN SHE BECOMES HER. BUT WHAT IS SHE? WHO IS THIS *IDÉE FIXE* OF DESIRE AND CONTEMPT?

IN THEIR EXHIBITION'S TITLE, *DESIGNING WOMEN*, MELANIE FLOOD AND MATT MORRIS SUGGEST A PERPETUAL ACTION. THE VERB IS EXPANSIVE, REACHING BACKWARDS, THROUGH THE PRESENT TENSE AND INTO FOREVER. HERE ONE USES THEIR CREATIVE CAPACITIES TO FASHION A BLUEPRINT, TO MAP A FORM, TO ITERATE. IT IS A PRODUCTIVE GESTURE, BRINGING AN IDEA INTO THE THIRD DIMENSION—WHICH IS TO SAY, MAKING IT REAL. THOUGH THE ASSERTION THAT WOMEN CAN, INDEED, BE DESIGNED ESTABLISHES AN AESTHETIC PROJECT AND A SUBJECT POSITION, IT IS UNKNOWN WHAT ACTORS ARE AT PLAY. ANOTHER QUESTION EMERGES: WHO IS THIS DESIGNER?

FROM THEIR INDIVIDUAL VANTAGES, FLOOD AND MORRIS APPREHEND WOMEN AS BOTH PRODUCER AND OBJECT OF MANUFACTURE. EACH ARTIST ADDRESSES THE FELT PARTICULARITIES OF FEMININITY AS IT IS PERFORMED AND CO-CONSTRUCTED ACROSS TIME, EXPERIENCE, AND CULTURAL NORMS. FLOOD'S IMAGES OPERATE IN A DISTINCTLY PERSONAL REGISTER, USING THE TECHNOLOGIES OF SELF PORTRAITURE AND THE STILL LIFE TO BUILD AN UNFLINCHING ARCHIVE OF HERSELF. THROUGH PAINTING, TEXTILE-BASED INSTALLATION, AND PERFUMERY, MORRIS MINES THE HISTORICAL AND MATERIAL ELEMENTS UPON WHICH FEMININITY IS BUILT AND MAY BE REIMAGINED. DIVING HEADFIRST INTO ORNATE HUES AND TEXTURES, THE WORKS ON VIEW COMPEL AUDIENCES TO ENGAGE WITH AESTHETICS OFTEN RELEGATED TO THE SUPERFICIAL AND UNSERIOUS (THE WOMANLY): NUDE BODIES, SATIN, BOWS, SEQUINS—EVERYONE'S INVITED TO THE PARTY.

FLOOD'S PHOTOGRAPHY PRACTICE HAS LONG BEEN CONCERNED WITH RELENTLESS AUTO-DOCUMENTATION. AT THE HEART OF THIS ENTERPRISE IS A PROBING OF THE MYTHOLOGIZED "IDEAL" FEMALE BODY. SHE OFTEN MANIPULATES SUBJECT MATTER (WHETHER HERSELF OR OTHERS) WITH REFLECTIVE MYLAR AND STUDIO LIGHTS, WHILE INCORPORATING VERNACULAR PHOTOGRAPHY AND IPHONE PICTURES. STILL LIVES CENTER COSMETICS, JEWELRY, OBJECTS THAT POPULATE DREAMS OF BEING BEAUTIFUL. BUT FLOOD'S RESOLUTE, ARTISTIC EYE COYLY REVEALS THE RIDICULOUS STANDARDS WOMEN STRIVE TOWARDS IN THE ABSURDIST COMEDY OF BEAUTIFICATION: *BROW, LASH, LIP*, 2024 DEPICTS AN ENCOUNTER BETWEEN FLOOD AND A POORLY DEvised PROMOTION FOR DRUGSTORE MAKEUP. AN AGGRESSIVELY STENCILED EYEBROW AND FALSE LASHES HOVER OVER PERFECT PINK LIPS. THE CONSUMERIST CYCLOPS SEEMS PERVERSE AS IT RETURNS THE VIEWER'S GAZE AND REFLECTS THE VAGUE SEMBLANCE OF FLOOD'S HEAD AND SMARTPHONE.

SEVERAL WORKS ARE EXCEPTIONALLY FUNNY *VIS-À-VIS* A SELF-AWARENESS THAT ALLOWS FLOOD TO BEAT ANY DETRACTORS TO THE PUNCH. IN *FORTY-FOUR (ESTRACE)*, 2024, A

CAPLESS TUBE OF VAGINAL CREAM IS PAINSTAKINGLY NESTLED IN A COCOON OF VIBRANT RED FRINGE. THE ASSUMED EMBARRASSMENT SURROUNDING THE MENOPAUSAL BODY IS GIVEN EXCESSIVE PAGEANTRY, THE ARTIST'S IRREVERENCE SHINING THROUGH. WITH SIMILAR RESISTANCE TO SHAME, *LADY PARTS*, 2024 IS A PORTRAIT OF THREE NUDE FIGURES STANDING SPREAD EAGLE OVER A FLOOR COVERED IN PURPLE MYLAR, THE CAMERA INTERRUPTING THEIR FREAKY RITUAL. A LOOSE STREAMER IS STREWN ACROSS ONE PERSON'S FOOT. FACES BLURRED, THEY ARE THREE IMMACULATE HOLES.

IN CERTAIN INSTANCES, FLOOD TURNS THE CAMERA ON HERSELF TO SHOW PRECARIETY, HER BODY PRONE TO VIOLENCE. PHYSICAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL VULNERABILITY IS LAID BARE IN *BLACK EYE (SELF-PORTRAIT)*, 2001/2024. THE ARTIST POSES AGAINST A STARK WALL WITH A BLACK EYE MADE MORE SEVERE BY THE CAMERA'S FLASH. THE BRUISE GLOWS IN VARYING SHADES OF PINK, YELLOW, AND PURPLE. A PEACEFUL EXPRESSION AND OTHERWISE FLAWLESS SKIN DISTANCE THE SUBJECT FROM THE PRESUPPOSED CIRCUMSTANCES OF THE INJURY. IT IS INTIMATE, NO DOUBT, BUT NOT SENTIMENTAL OR AFFECTED. THE STRIKING IMPACT OF FLOOD'S WORK LIES IN HER ABILITY TO FOCUS ON HERSELF WITHOUT GIVING IT ALL AWAY.

IF FLOOD INTERROGATES WOMANHOOD'S PROTEAN QUALITIES THROUGH HER OWN SUBJECTIVITY, MORRIS' WORK OPERATES FROM A POSITION OF ECCENTRIC PLURALITY. HIS MULTIFACETED PRACTICE DEEPLY CONSIDERS THEN REORIENTS THE REPRESSIVE NARROWNESS OF CONVENTIONAL FEMININITY BY TRACING ITS SENSORY AND MATERIAL FEATURES THROUGH VARIOUS ERAS. POWDERY AND FLORAL SCENTS, IRIDESCENT UNDERTONES, SOFT FABRICS, AND SHIMMERING CRYSTALS APPEAR THROUGHOUT HIS OEUVRE. IN TURN, MORRIS CONJURES IDENTITIES AND INSTANCES OF SOCIALITY THAT GO OTHERWISE UNREPRESENTED; QUEER LIFE IS HISTORICALLY -SITUATED AND -VISIBLE. THE TIMELINE COLLAPSED, GLAMOR IS POROUS.

AS AN ARTIST WORKING IN FRAGRANCE, MORRIS HAS MADE A PERFUME AS AN ACCOMPANIMENT TO *DESIGNING WOMEN*. THE SCENT PROFILE IS FULL OF STONE FRUIT AND FLOWERS, AND IS SIMULTANEOUSLY SOAPY AND STERILE. IT IS REMINISCENT OF THE "COMING OF AGE" PERFUMES FOUND IN EARLY 1990S DEPARTMENT STORES, MEANT TO BE COQUETTISH BUT UNMISTAKABLY CLEAN. WITHIN THE EXHIBITION'S CONTEXT, MORRIS' PERFUME FUNCTIONS AS A CONTEMPLATION OF HOW CERTAIN SMELLS HAVE BEEN CULTURALLY DEMARCATED FOR EMBELLISHMENT, OTHERS FOR HYGIENE—ALL TO MAKE WOMEN LESS DISGUSTING (HUMAN) AND MORE CONSUMABLE.

MORRIS' WORKS ON VIEW ARE ANCHORED BY THE DREAMLIKE STYLINGS OF THE 1930S AND 1940S. HIS SUITE OF OIL PAINTINGS IS BASED ON PHOTOGRAPHS MADE BY FEMME ARTISTS OF THE PERIOD AND INSPIRED BY THE QUASI-SURREALIST IMAGERY OF RINGL + PIT, A PHOTOGRAPHY STUDIO IN BERLIN RUN BY GRETE STERN AND ELLEN AUERBACH (BOTH CREATIVE COLLABORATORS AND LOVERS). PALETTES ARE ROSY AND ASHEN AND COMPOSITIONS HAZY, AS IF SEEN ACROSS A SMOKE-FILLED ROOM. THIS FOGGINESS CAN BE ATTRIBUTED TO A PAINTING TECHNIQUE THE ARTIST REFERS TO AS "COSMETIC DRAG," IN WHICH IMPASTO REACHES AN INFLECTION POINT WHERE FIGURES AT ONCE EMERGE AND BREAK APART.

SEVERAL EXHIBITED WORKS ARE PART OF AN ONGOING SERIES CALLED *THE WOMEN*. MORRIS' AESTHETIC COMMITMENTS COALESCE PERHAPS MOST VIVIDLY IN THE LARGEST PAINTING, *THE WOMEN (LEE MILLER, DREAMING OF THESE, 1942 / EILEEN AGAR, BY A HARBOUR, 1934)*, 2024. IT IS A PAINTED INTERPRETATION OF A SPREAD BY AMERICAN PHOTOGRAPHER LEE MILLER IN A 1948 ISSUE OF *BRITISH VOGUE*, AND A PHOTOGRAPH BY THE BRITISH SURREALIST EILEEN AGAR. PERIOD MILLINERY AND HAND-SEWN CRYSTAL APPLIQUÉS MATERIALIZE FROM THE PICTORIAL PLANE TO EMPHASIZE THE MATERIAL TENSIONS BETWEEN THE TWO MEDIUMS. MILLER AND AGAR WERE CONTEMPORARIES, AND MORRIS BRINGS THEIR RELATIONSHIP INTO FLIRTATIOUS PROXIMITY AND MUTUAL EXCHANGE. IN *THE WOMEN (GRETE STERN, SUEÑO No. 16 SIRENA DEL MAR, 1948) – FOR TORI AMOS, SIREN. II*, 2024, A PAIR OF ARMS REACH FOR THE BARE BOTTOM OF A SECOND FIGURE. THE CURVACEOUS SHAPE AND REPOSED POSTURE OF THE FIGURE EVOKE THE PROLIFERATION OF BOUDOIR PHOTOGRAPHY IN THE 20TH CENTURY, BUT THE DISEMBODIED, ENCROACHING HANDS CREATE A SINISTER ATMOSPHERE UNTETHERED TO TIME OR PLACE. THE SCENE EXPANDS MORRIS' ONGOING STUDY OF THE LIMITS AND FREEDOMS OF ARTISTIC REPRODUCTION, AND THE DIFFERENT TEXTURAL AND SURFACE ACCUMULATIONS PRESENT IN EACH PAINTING INTENSIFY A SENSE OF PREDATION. LIKE THE SUBJECT'S OWN BODIES, POSSIBILITIES FOR VIOLENCE AND EROTICISM CROP UP AND RETREAT FROM THE CANVAS.

ELSEWHERE, MORRIS HAS AFFIXED TEXTILE BÂTONS FROM FLOOR TO CEILING. MADE OF STACKED ROWS OF GATHERED AND SEWN SATIN, THESE WORKS ARE TOTEM-LIKE IN ORIENTATION AS THEIR HEIGHT CREATES EMOTIONAL RESONANCE. À LA DELEUZE, MORRIS APPROACHES THE FOLD AS A RECURSIVE NEGOTIATION BETWEEN THE INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL, DOUBLING BACK UPON ITSELF IN INFINITE ARRANGEMENTS. THE SATIN IS PRINTED WITH REFERENTIAL MATERIAL THAT IS THEN FOLDED REPEATEDLY, COMPRISING A LIVE DOSSIER OF THOUGHT AND SURFACE.

AGAIN WE MAY ASK, WHAT IS A WOMAN? AS JUDITH BUTLER ELUCIDATES IN THEIR 2024 BOOK *WHO'S AFRAID OF GENDER?*, FEMINISTS TAKE INDETERMINABILITY AS A FUNDAMENTAL CONDITION OF THE QUESTION, ACKNOWLEDGING FROM THE OUTSET THAT THE MEANING OF THE CATEGORY IS "UNSETTLED, AND EVEN ENIGMATIC." RATHER THAN DEMYSTIFYING THE WOMAN AS BEING, GENDER MORE BROADLY IS TAKEN AS INHERENTLY SHIFTING, DECONSTRUCTIVE BY NATURE. BEYOND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS OR ARTISTIC MILIEUS, THIS LINE OF THOUGHT MAY BE THE GROUNDING THESIS OF *DESIGNING WOMEN*. WOMANHOOD MOVES, GLINTING IN THE SUN LIKE WATER.

—JAYNE PUGH



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