

Baroque Minimalism: Variations on a serious black dress.

Fourteen black squares: the women

It might seem audacious to regard the darkened squares of Rothko's Chapel series, with their deeply imbued spirituality, as a respectable front for latent eroticism, but Dani Marti's *Variations on a serious black dress.*, does exactly that. At first glance Marti's series of works (fourteen in number, just like Rothko's Huston chapel) seems typical of abstraction's high seriousness and Rothko's Formalism. An all or nothing affair, of massive black squares.

Stripped back to the material purity of layers of oil on canvas, Rothko's chapel works consisted of nothing but Greenberg's painterly matter, the work of art reduced to painting's two-dimensional surface upon which the luscious nature of pigment exhibited itself in the depths of its intensity. A viewer contemplating these surfaces entered into the paradoxical discourse of a void that was full and empty at the same time. Were these works cleansed of all representational elements in order to saturate the canvas with the full nothingness of the higher order of pure spirit? Or, as material substance did they remain just that - immanently expressive of the material plane and full of the body of substance? Evoking this same deep tension of abstract expressionism's paradoxically saturated and empty void, Marti's series is a reminder that even Rothko's temple to the spirit is reached through the enjoyment of the physical plane of matter.

But Marti, unlike Rothko, is unashamedly sexual, and his woven black surfaces are charged with latent eroticism, as emphasised in his titles: for example, *Variation #1 Asiatic angel, greeted by a young nipple*. The formalism of the black square functions as the straightjacket which conducts you from the thought of a cheeky nipple to the abstract plane of release. All, and nothing. The tight two-dimensional plane of Formalism functions like an elevator, gathering and sublimating erotic energies more usually associated with the Baroque. The trajectory embodies the one elaborated by Deleuze in *The Fold*, his exegesis on the Baroque, in which he traced the twisting and torsion of matter from its denser forms all the way to the abstract strata which he named spirit or soul¹. As such, in Deleuze's schema, materialism's immanence folds into transcendence in a movement which is exemplified in Bernini's *Saint Theresa* - from the feet, up through the spiralling fabric, to her upwards gaze and expletive of breath. And it's in the marble folds of her receptive fabric that sacred *jouissance* is transmuted: sartorial pleasure and eroticism reach apotheosis in one ecstatic moment. Any number of Baroque canvases of the European masters - Goya, Valesquez, El Greco - have similarly traded on the evocative draping of fabric around the body to amplify the passional aspect of the spirit, and Marti follows in this tradition with an evocative reinterpretation of the sparse planes of pure Minimalism.

However, Marti has no need to inscribe a body swathed in cloth - to literally represent flesh and limbs and El Greco's heavenly ascent- as in the familiar tropes of the Baroque. It is enough to draw the eye in to the torsions and tensions of Marti's woven surfaces, to translate the passionate impulses into the movements paradoxically frozen within the weave, and to read the sensibilities of the attached personalities there. In a sense the representation of bodies is superfluous, the personality rendered both more abstract and more intimate - distilled through the passion for representational cloth.

If Rothko had achieved the seemingly instantaneous transformation of so-called brute matter of the painterly surface to the spiritual plane, Marti follows a similar trajectory, but through a Baroque flourishing of the bodily drama inherent in his woven surfaces. However, the movement of Baroque ascension is replaced by Minimalism's overall saturation of the surface and the passion of Marti's works is not necessarily turned heavenwards. His channeling of the spirit more complexly compounds with wayward sexualities bordering on the perverse.

This, of course, takes place in the associative train set up in the viewer's mind. Marti is merely suggestive. The titles might be provocative but ultimately it's up to each viewer to bring her/his own experience to the work, to mentally lay one's body into his surfaces, of which it must be said that they are not to be confounded with the stuff of mere realworld garments. Firstly, his overblown swatches are of such a scale as to dwarf the body of the viewer. Marti's large black squares (3 metres by 3 metres) are of the dimensions to arouse the sensations of a full body caress as one finds oneself falling into the lustre of his surfaces, depth upon depth. Excess of size presses close with the intensity of a perfume or a bodily memory. The magnification effect is such that the viewer is brought so close as to experience the sensation of being shrunk inside, to voyage through the fabric with an intimacy that is like bodily contact.

Indeed, this falling into fabric is becoming a Marti trademark: the becoming-particle of a viewer entering a molecularized space. It happened literally in *Looking For Felix* - in which viewers physically entered a cube of layered walls of shimmering bead curtains². Very much in the manner of Blake's mental traveller the "ratio of the Spectator's Organs (of perception)" is altered. (*Milton*, Plate 28, 18)³. The torsion of the Baroque is translated into a two-dimensional plane inflected with Romantic depths, which draw the viewer into an intimate contact with the surface. For there's no doubt that the associations of the fabric and the flesh, of skin against cloth - not to mention the S&M intimations of Marti's silky, if oversized, cords and ropes - implicate the viewer.

But the degree of mental travelling triggered by each of these works is modulated by the complex relationships established within each woven surface. Different emotional tones are evoked by each of the dresses. For, in the manner of the Old Masters, Marti is creating portraits through what is given out by the "passion for cloth", hinting at the psychosexuality of each personality. When you read the full titles, *Holding her breath. 7 January 1536 (fragile fabric, looks like brocade, after Catherine of Aragon)*, or *Goyesca -Alba gently lies down (inspired by intricate rich Spanish fabric)*, the relationship which the viewer develops with each 'scrap of cloth' develops along emotional lines. Marti has eliminated the need for representation - to paint a likeness of each of his Muses, some of whom are imaginary and others historical - by drawing on the latent associations of cloth.

This "passion for cloth" has been analysed in psychoanalytical terms in the case study of Clérambault, a distinguished French psychiatrist (*La passion des étoffes chez un neuro-psychiatre, G.G. de Clérambault* by Y. Papetti, B. Freminville, F. Valier and S. Tisseron, 1981). Clérambault was a collector of all forms of exotic cloth, who poured his passion into his "taste for rare cloth, Indian, madras, Oriental fabric brocaded with gold and silver." (Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire*, 65)⁴ In her chapter, "The Sartorial Superego", Joan Copjec draws out further links to Clérambault's enthusiasm for drapery in art, for not only was Clérambault a collector of cloth, but he also delivered a series of highly popular courses at the Beaux-Arts in Paris, in which he would use Moroccan drapery to reinterpret classical sculpture. A contemporary, Joseph Kesell, noted that "Clérambault was the first to consider the flowing folds of clothes as the signature of a race, a tribe. He conducted his research on Assyrian tunics, Greek chlamys, Roman togas, Arab cloth. He studied their curve and their signature, he made them speak." (ibid, 72) However, the fact that none of Clérambault's peers took his study at face value - an anthropological study of race and tribe - points to peer agreement on the underlying libidinal coding of cloth. Instead, the work of Clérambault, has been re-interpreted, in turn, as an important psychoanalytic study of a man too passionately attached to cloth - an obsessional, a fetishist. He exemplified the failure of "the will to unwrap", an unaccountable defaulting of desire" in "halting at the initial stages of the complete sexual scenario" (ibid. 69). In other words, his desire was fixated in fabrics, confirming the underlying psychosexual connection between cloth and eroticism.

Marti expands on this idea of libidinal coding and the psychosexual portrait which can be established through a meditation on the connotations of cloth. The differences could already be seen in the work of old masters, in the way, for example, Gainsborough had a hand hold a feather at crutch height against a silk dress (again the lustre) in *The Honourable Mrs Graham*, or Murillo graced a velvet bodice with pearls. When Marti titles black dress #7 *Neo Gothic Barbie lost in*

knitted fantasies, it's a portrait in which the "fluffiness" of her sexuality is evoked directly from sartorial cues. *Agnes cupping her breast (after Agnes Martin - the grid)* is a tightly woven - held-in - with little action on the surface. Very much like an Agnes Martin work, it is all subtle changes: minimalism surprisingly imbued with sexuality. Across the fourteen black dresses the tone ranges from the restrained to *#13 pheromones percolating... (madness totally irregular, crazy weave, young crazy sexual energy)*. Or *Strictly porn*, woven entirely in black rubber, is a work in which rigorous and rigidly knotted columns combine the wild pleasure of 'strict' with the discipline of the grid.

Other titles play up the psychosexual charge of the taboo "without which eroticism cannot exist" (Bataille, *Eroticism*, 139)⁵. Marti's snatch of words - *Teresa on her knees. Head down* - is enough to evoke sacred transgression. Or, in the manner of Genet, the smuttier his titles, the more Marti's works withdraw into the pristine. "I then understood why the handsomest adolescents give themselves to the vilest old men. Nothing can defile them. Their beauty guards them." (*Miracle of the Rose*, 101)⁶ In the matt black surfaces of absorption of the "dresses" nothing dirty stays written. They can be filled with as many fantasies as one pleases. Like absolution, sins are transmuted in their inky depths.

Three steel floorpieces: the Men

The 'codpieces', as Marti calls them, are also formally high Minimalist, the masculine counterpart and counterpoint to the dresses. Like a Carl Andre grid of blocks, they establish themselves as floorworks - sculptures which literally take the floor, centre stage, in the manner of traditional pontificators or rulers. And Marti has titled them to match: *Codpiece (Felipe II)*; *Codpiece (Henry VIII)*; *Codpiece of an Unknown Ruler in the Golden Age.*, again invoking the Baroque.

Woven in a tight meshing of steel cords, with tiny flashes of colour, they recall armour and the balzoned patterns of Toledo's steel-smiths, and carry the stamp of aristocratic bearing. The codpiece is a formidable and worthy obstacle to sexual gratification, akin to Clérambault's fabrics as symbols of withheld sexual pleasure. They build up anticipation of the majestic cock, which is not to be unveiled. The king or ruler's symbolic phallus, upon which his power is hinged, is reboxed and resublimated⁷. Metal, shields, blazonry, heraldry: these references compound a complex of regal power reduced to aesthetic sign and conform a purchase on masculinity which manifests to this day in commercial branding (Wilkinson's pair of rapier swords selling razors). The codpiece, protecting the precious body parts producing the royal sperm, publically conflates masculinity and sexual potency. Thus, in designating these sculptures as 'codpieces,' Marti is exploring the resonant, resilient association of the dominant masculine tropes of potency and

strength; and, further, emblematically representing the intensity of the power in its compaction into tight impermeable surfaces.

The dresses, by contrast, are more open to flirting - and ecstatic sublimation. Partly through the habits of interpretation established by Rothko, the intensity of their material surfaces easily transmutes into spiritual planes. The codpieces remain more grounded, of the earth, and the regime of the sign. The women soar; the men compact in an exercise through which the sublimation of sex into power is achieved by forceful repression.

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Notes

1. Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold* (London: Athlone, 1993).
2. Dani Marti, *Looking For Felix*. First Draft, December 2000 Sydney.
3. William Blake, *Milton* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1979).
4. Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire* (Cambridge. Mass. & London: MIT Press, 1994).
5. George Bataille, *Eroticism*. Trans. Mary Dalwood (London: Marion Boyers, 1987).
6. Jean Genet, *Miracle of the Rose*. Trans. Bernard Fretchman. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971).
7. This association between the phallus and power was first elaborated by Jacques Lacan, "The Signification of the Phallus", in *Ecrits*. Trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Tavistock, 1977). Slavoj Zizek has since elaborated on the political implications of this concept in several books, notably *Tarrying With the Negative* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993)