

Orit Raff

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, in Paris, the body of a young woman, whose identity remains unknown to this day, was found. Her unalloyed beauty and body devoid of any signs of violence led to the belief that it was a suicide (death by drowning in a river was common in those days). It is also said that the French pathologist who performed the autopsy at the morgue was so struck by the unique beauty of her delicate face, with its enigmatic smile and serene expression, that he made a plaster-cast death mask of it. To this day, it is not known if this is a true story, or an urban legend. Either way, whether she was a real or fictional character, the mysterious young woman was dubbed *L'inconnue de la Seine* (Anonymous of the Seine), and has been a source of inspiration and fantasy for artists and writers, intellectuals and academics ever since.

The portrait of the anonymous woman in her death mask, which features in Orit Raff's work, has been a recurring image in high and popular culture. It was replicated in a series of decorative busts for bourgeois homes, and became a sought-after fashion model for women. Albert Camus, who kept a replica of the death mask in his studio, called the anonymous woman the "Drowned Mona Lisa"; Rainer Maria Rilke mentioned it in his book *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* (1910); Vladimir Nabokov named a poem of his after her in 1934; her image preoccupied some of the Surrealist artists, including Man Ray, who created a sculpture based on her profile (1960); and even the CPR training mannequin "Rescue Annie" was cast in her image. In her various incarnations as a martyred saint, as a dead Mona Lisa, or as the latter-day equivalent of Shakespeare's Ophelia (who also died by drowning), the *L'inconnue de la Seine* continues to stir imaginations to this day.

Orit Raff, whose artistic roots are in photography, uses a frontal image of the anonymous woman's death mask (dating to the early twentieth century) as it appears online – flat, pixelated, distorted, in low resolution. It is in this guise that it appears as a mausoleum for the same oft-replicated image, which has cascaded down the cultural downslope, sweeping along with an endless number of human ideas and fantasies; an original-less image that, over the years, has become a romantic icon. In front of the image Raff has placed a protective barrier made of hollow glass that, despite its material fragility, fences off and blocks the image from the viewer. The partition, in its very presence, invokes images of policed protests, or sterile hospital or laboratory spaces – but also of religious spaces of contemplation, which imbue the image with the mythical-mystical meanings it has accrued over the years. According

to Raff, the partition is also a reference to the “houses of the dead” of early twentieth-century France – museum-like rooms or “rooms of wonder” that offered spectacles of morbid entertainment for the masses, with a glass window serving as a buffer between the living viewer and the dead on display. The partition imposes both a physical and a conceptual distance. The thin, delicate glass it is made of is indicative of its inadequacy for the task, or its function as nothing more than a perfunctory barrier – a psychological obstacle that separates the image of the anonymous woman from the viewer.

In the adjoining space, Raff presents a close-up photograph of a bar of soap, with the words “Dirty Girl” inscribed in an elegant hand. This photograph was first shown at her exhibition *The Pot Calling the Kettle Black* (2002), in which Raff dealt with the obsessive human need for purification and cleansing. The phrase “Dirty Girl” is an ironic reference to the dual perception of woman as holy and harlot, an allusion to the profound and degrading alternating view of women as the purveyors of dark sexuality and as embodiments of virginal purity. The contemporary image – a mass-produced bar of soap, also drawn from the stock images of popular culture – is linked to the macabre image of the anonymous woman, and harks to the preoccupation of modern medicine with concealing death from the realms of human daily life: Who is that girl, and why is she dirty? The reference to contemporary consumer culture suffuses the clean aesthetics with a sense of illusion and fantasy, coupled with a hidden, seductive, and disturbing meaning. The viral image of the anonymous woman of the Seine encapsulates an obsessive preoccupation with death and a romantic fascination with it as well as its enveloping dark horror – then and now.

Hadassa Cohen

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