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## THE GLOBE AND MAIL

### **Servane Mary's women of substance on wisps of silk**

*Servane Mary at Clint Roenisch Gallery*

*944 Queen St. W., Toronto, until July 28*

The textile works of New York-based, Swiss-French artist Servane Mary, currently on display at Clint Roenisch Gallery, are deceptively straightforward, even simple – simple looking, that is.

Working in collaboration with the roving curatorial initiative Shoot The Lobster, Mary presents a series of transparent, faintly printed silk panels in neutral or very pale colours. Strung up loosely, even droopily on the gallery walls – or in the gallery's main room, on a long, sagging string, like clothes drying on a line – the works flutter and float, seemingly indifferent to the gallery-standard rigours of presentation strategy, or anything else denoting "professionalism."

I want to use the word sloppy here, but that might lead you to think the works are carelessly or poorly made, whereas the reality is that the presentation of the works, or, rather, under-presentation, is designed to reiterate the works' metaphors that speak to the fragility and temporality of fame.

The subjects presented on the see-through panels are almost exclusively heroines or controversial female characters. Actresses such as Mariel Hemingway and Jean Seberg, political figures such as Margaret Trudeau and Angela Davis, and the formidable Grace Slick, rock goddess. What unites these women is the simple truth that while each of them had experience with an enormous amount of fame and/or notoriety, it came with a heavy price.

Hemingway is, of course, granddaughter to Ernest (not exactly a model of mental health) and sister to the troubled Margaux, who

committed suicide. Hemingway's decision to play lesbian characters all but killed her stardom. Davis was an American radical and Communist Party member in the 1960s and 1970s who, even in more recent years as an academic, remains a political lightning rod. Seberg was followed and harassed by the FBI for supporting the Black Panthers, and later committed suicide. Slick, a multiple arrestee, once allegedly pointed a gun at a police officer and tried to spike Richard Nixon's tea with LSD. And Trudeau is Canada's Betty Ford.

My kind of ladies!

Printing portraits on web-thin, rather tatty silk of these beloved neurotics (I can say that since I aspire to such status) creates a multifold effect.

First, the gallery looks like a tee-shirt shop gone to seed. I have never seen such a casual exhibition at this venue, which is renowned for its pristine presentation. The signal here is that, while these women are iconic, they are also, like all celebrities, easily reduced to simple, and cheap, sets of visual cues.

Second, the veiling effect of the silk, converse to the effect stated above, creates an aura of mystery, which in turn makes the subjects even more iconic, because they are distant. Mary's double dealing here is fascinating: She reduces her subjects, turns them into wispy near non-entities, and then simultaneously reinvests each woman with a new, material-driven aura of glamour and mystique.

The prints both erase and revivify the status and legend of each subject. This is portraiture that not only admits to the impossibility of true, full capture through portraiture, but also embraces those limitations. The semiotic games being played here – ones wherein the portraits are first objects themselves, representing actual persons and histories, and then become reflections back onto the viewer of our own projection-driven worship of each woman depicted – would have Roland Barthes clapping his nicotine-stained hands in glee.

In this hall of mirrors (or rogues gallery, depending on your point of view), one portrait stands out for its total lack of celebrity-infested

signifiers. Only by asking the gallerist did I learn anything about the woman depicted.

On a large, chalky white sheet of silk, Mary has printed a head-and-shoulders image of a white woman sporting a mid-20th-century hairdo. The woman's expression is neutral, and the entire image is partially veiled by a second, top-printed layer of multi-coloured pattern that resembles prison fencing or fish net.

The woman's neck is wrapped in a thick, dark scarf. She looks indirectly toward the camera (and the viewer), and her eyes are hooded, deeply set. Perhaps she was too shy to pose, or is trying to avoid a mug shot, or was caught off guard. The gallery didactics do not give her a name; nor do they give the work much of a title. She is simply labeled *Woman with Net*, the "net" referring to the thin, honeycombed print that overlaps her face and shoulders.

Turns out the woman was an Allied spy during WWII, or so I was told. A woman, in other words, who lived, and perhaps died, pursuing invisibility; the very opposite of everything chased, worked for, and perhaps coveted by the famous women in the other portraits. The net is an obvious metaphor for the woman's shrouded life, and perhaps also for the outcome of her career. Was she caught? Killed? Was she a hero, and, if so, why is her name not presented?

In an era when fame and infamy are interchangeable (one suspects they always were), this tribute to a woman who is, counter-intuitively, iconic because of her cultivated inexactness, stares back at us with a palpable, and heartbreaking, resignation.

As Erica Jong (whose name seems to be everywhere, again) once said, "Fame means millions of people have the wrong idea of who you are."

<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/art-and-architecture/servane-marys-women-of-substance-on-wisps-of-silk/article4429918/>