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FOCUS

## Lili Reynaud Dewar

Avant-gardism and Black Power; sexual injustice and radical Italian design  
*by Quinn Latimer*

'I have always wanted to be in conversation with Sun Ra, but I have decided to talk to my mother instead,' Lili Reynaud Dewar deadpanned mysteriously in an interview with curator Alexis Vaillant last year. The strange equivalence that the French artist suggests between these two distinct personages – one, an Afro-futurist free jazz bandleader, poet and activist-philosopher; the other, Mireille Rias, Reynaud Dewar's mother and frequent collaborator – is emblematic of her esoteric *oeuvre*. In it, her personal biography becomes both mirror and skeleton key to a history of avant-gardism, Black Power, gendered labour practices, radical Italian design and various speculative fictions that attempt to subvert racial and sexual injustice. More specifically, though, the Paris-based artist was addressing the show that she was then preparing at Kunsthalle Basel (entitled 'Interpretation', it opened last April), which would comprise an inspired meditation on both her mother and Sun Ra.



Though based on historical research, Reynaud Dewar's works often evoke the feeling that one has landed on a riotous new planet where time and space are anything but linear. Fittingly, the centrepiece of 'Interpretation' evoked a Suprematist-shaded spaceship (*Interpretation Structure*, 2010). Against the wooden structure's mirrored interior, a video projection showed Rias, a striking woman in a carnivalesque dress, seated on a throne-like chair whose jarring geometry referenced Ettore Sottsass's Memphis Group furniture. After she theatrically described attending a Sun Ra concert in France in 1970, Rias began dancing slowly around the throne – placed in the same gallery that the viewer stood in now – to the fractured, frenetic sounds of the original concert itself.

This moving, séance-like scene was accompanied by the pencil-on-cardboard series, 'Interpretation Drawings' (2010), which featured stencilled simulacrum of Sun Ra's 1950s-era pamphlets such as *A Spook Sho Is a*



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*Dragg Man, He's a Dragg*. The throne was there too, its geometric forms deftly dressed in African fabrics from Paris markets. Taken together, the exhibition explored notions of identity, performance, design and origins: Sun Ra famously insisted he was from Saturn (slyly undercutting those who would associate him with the lineage of slavery); Rias, in turn, is the artist's originator, though here she took on an otherworldly identity. Nevertheless, the equilibrium Reynaud Dewar achieved with these disparate histories was discomfiting. That the show's very power came from this disquiet, however, has long held true of the artist's work.

After studying ballet and law before pursuing art criticism, Reynaud Dewar made her first art works in 2005. This series of geometric sculptures – formally indebted to Suprematism and Sottsass – employed the colours of the Rastafarian flag. The works' weird power came from their commanding forms, but also from their odd Rasta referents. That they didn't feel exploitative didn't squash the idea that they still might be. 'They were really my manifesto of "illegitimity", and of identity misplacement,' the artist told me. 'My intention wasn't to capitalize on those cultural signs, but to put myself in a situation (symbolic in the beginning) of identity loss.' That one needs an assigned 'other' to create that loss is problematic, as Reynaud Dewar acknowledges, yet the strength of the work lies in its transgressions, which glean the fields of her history as much as of others'.

Since then, the artist's approach has become more formally and conceptually elaborate. *Black Mariab* (2009) investigates cinematic beginnings via Thomas Edison's eponymous 1893 tar-papered film studio, in which he mostly filmed vaudevillians and burlesque performers; likewise, Reynaud Dewar's work engaged

a quartet of costumed female performers, some of whom were in blackface. *The Power Structures, Rituals and Sexuality of the European Shorthand Typists* (2009–10), meanwhile, investigates technological obsolescence married to sexualized labour. In the film, Rias teaches this 'skill' to two young women in a marshland, itself a morphing landscape of elimination. The recent *Cléda's Chairs* (2010), in turn, contrasts the artist's grandmother's history with Pier Paolo Pasolini's film *Notes for an African Orestes* (1975), which endeavoured to transpose Aeschylus's Greek tragedies to Africa. The film shows Cléda packing up her antique-filled house as she prepares to retire to a Modernist condo. As she talks about her life, two white girls in blackface enter the house and begin to cover two antique chairs with black polish; in the background, Pasolini's film plays on a TV. The charged congruence of different threads – Reynaud Dewar's matrilineal lineage, furniture design, post-colonial history intersecting with the avant-garde – is startling. Yet the investigation of difference as defined by surface (skin, design, economic, filmic, sexual) is nuanced and compelling.

Reynaud Dewar's primary interests and methodologies – research and performance – are common in recent art. But she does not employ history as either a stationary formal device or nostalgic lens; instead, she transforms myriad histories into new works that walk directly into the (or some) future. Similarly, her investment in a kind of politicized vaudevillian theatre – an anachronism in today's art world – sets her apart. It makes sense, then, that her work evokes literary and theatrical predecessors. Her twining of technology with racial and sexual politics conjures the speculative writing of Donna Haraway and Octavia Butler, who use science and sci-fi (as did Sun Ra) to transcend issues of injustice. Reynaud Dewar's theatrical roots appear to lie with Bertolt Brecht and Rainer Werner Maria Fassbinder, after whose 'Antiteater' troupe she titled an exhibition. But despite these influences, and the complicated histories they limn, the artist's works – complex and dauntingly expert – appear to travel relentlessly forward, prescient preambles of we know not what.