

Emerging Artists

ALEXIS MARGUERITE TEPLIN

Rachel Kushner contemplates the rocailles of a new rococo

IT'S NEVER SEEMED LIKE a stretch to me to compare painting to the patina and lustre of cosmetics. I often think of both in a single realm – surfaces painted, powdered, rouged. As early as 1673, Roger de Piles, in favour of colour and artifice, declared that painting is makeup. This seems particularly true of certain art-historical eras, like eighteenth-century France, when the utility of images has been less clear, less discursive, and painting has drifted into the province of ornament – in other words, a feminine province – whose intent, like the work of makeup, is to invoke desire and the promise of pleasure. The trick of makeup is the trick of femininity, activated with a pellucid dusting. And painting cannot *be*, much less be activated, without its own dusting. Though the more lush and 'frivolous' painting of eighteenth-century France was quickly declared *démodé* as neoclassicism prevailed, its deceit and pleasures keep coming back in various guises. Makeup has been around for thousands of years. And desire much longer that.

Often painted on large oval canvases that read as valentines to eighteenth-century portraiture, the thicket of opulent, broken colour in the works of Alexis Marguerite Teplin – a London-based artist from California – are not just about the sensuality of the painterly trace, but those painterly traces that managed to escape the corset of the French Académie. *La Robe à Ramages* (2004–5), included in her recent solo show at Gavlak Gallery in West Palm Beach, recalls, as its title would imply, early Vuillard (*à la Lady of Fashion*, 1892), as well as the ambiguous perspectives of Fragonard, whose rococo panels encouraged

looking at, and never into, gauzy feminine realms. Teplin's paintings might bring to mind Matisse, or certain twentieth-century abstractions by Hans Hofmann or Joan Mitchell, but they are also dilations of the opacities and withholding of Watteau, and the intentionally insufficient brushwork of Fragonard. Brushwork that, according to Norman Bryson, carries either lubricious meanings, or meanings that illuminate no discourse, that are *only* figural.

But Teplin's practice across diverse media (painting, sculpture and collage) isn't just about enacting historical latencies in the clouded signification of paint surface, but the desire that pulses under those latencies, in the clouded signification of bodily surface. Her sculptures, composed of opulent fragments of accoutrements from various epochs, are shrines to feminine subterfuge and seduction, as well as the male fantasy of that subterfuge. Silk wedding shoes placed on a pedestal in *With a Black Fan and White Gloves*, first shown in 2003 at London's Entwistle Gallery, seem intended not for marriage, but euphemism and fetish, in the manner that slippers are containers for drinking in the world of Masoch, and in Fragonard's *The Swing* (1767), offered in lieu of undergarment glimpses. Teplin's *M* (2004), a Mata Hari-inspired crown and breastplate of raw amber, feathers and gold, is a study of signs that are meant not to be read, but to entrap. But if we consider the following, linked in succession (like amber beads), meanings start to accrue: Mata Hari was a Javanese-costumed Dutch stripper. Referred to by historians as a 'frumpy courtesan' who was 'pushing forty', she was alleged to

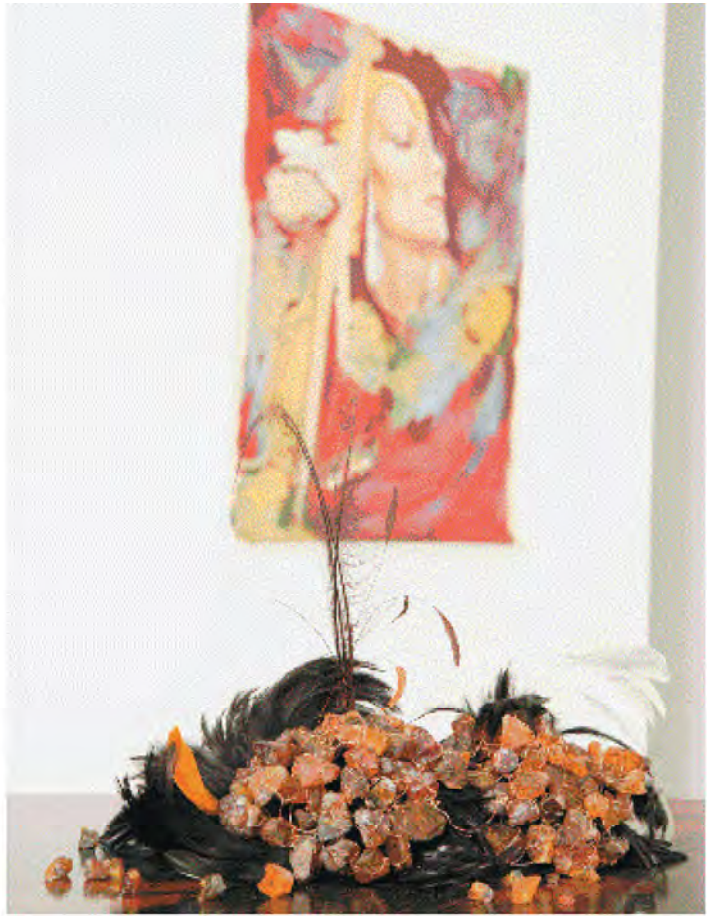
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Teplin

have been a spy during the First World War. When presented with secret ink that had been found in her room, she claimed it was makeup, but then confessed under oath and was executed. Greta Garbo, who played Mata Hari in the eponymous 1931 film, was known as the queen of Art Deco in an age when Hollywood adopted the style in costuming, sets and cinema palace decor. Amber, popular in Art Deco jewellery, is fossilized pine resin. And Deco style, though in its own time paradoxically referred to as *moderne*, was influenced by the 1922 discovery of Tutankhamen's tomb and the wealth of Egyptian ornament that lay inside. Ornament that, it should be noted, was deeply discursive – but to Egyptians. And so the lure of Egyptiana is the lure of unreadable signs. And the lure of amber, in part, is the lure of death.

Loosely considered an installation, *M* was displayed at Gavlak with *Matta* (2004), a poster for the Mata Hari film onto which Teplin added her own brushwork, suggesting a synthesis (or struggle) between painting and cinema. Instead of the ominous helmeted military silhouettes that bear down on Garbo in the original poster, we see only her profile, and around her a profusion of colourful traces that occasionally coalesce into blurrily floral patterns. Embellishments that are halfway to the terminus of Stan Brakhage painting over a worn 70-millimetre print of *Irma La Douce* (1963) for the

Installation shot of *Parmour's test fou* (6 January – 4 February 2006) at Gavlak, West Palm Beach. Showing: (foreground) *M*, 2004, amber, pink and yellow gold, french polish and shellac on birch, 163 x 125 x 41 cm; (background) *Matta*, 2004, oil paint on found poster, 69 x 99 cm COURTESY GAVLAK, WEST PALM BEACH



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ALEXIS TEPLIN AT A GLANCE

Born 1976, California
Lives and works in London

On being lured to London from California

I came because of a fellowship at the Royal Academy, then didn't want to leave.

Favourite designer

I've acquired three favourite pieces of clothing this year: One is a silk blue-gray Christian Dior, 'Dior-ling' gown from the 50s, which was once owned by Dalí's favourite silent-film actress, Betty Stockfeld. The second is this amazing fire-engine-red velvet, draped Yuki cape from the 70s (it's ankle length). And the third is my dark green velvet Pre-Raphaelite dress that Giles made. Oh, and I love my Stephen Jones Udor hat cap.

Art shows worth seeing this year

The Kipperberger Show at MoCA in Los Angeles. I think Anne Goldstein has a way of curating a museum show that expands the

historical canon while remaining intimate. I thought her minimalist show was genius. I'm also dying to go to New York to see the Robert Rauschenberg Combines at the MoL. I think it is probably one of the most relevant shows for contemporary art's current obsession with collage.

Favourite historical painters

Depends on the day you ask me and my mood. But it's most often a specific painting rather than a painter. Sometimes it's Manet's female bullfighter, or Velázquez's *Lady with a Fan*, at the Wallace Collection. There's my favourite painting (since childhood) at the SFMoMA, Matise's woman with a hat; and I'm a sucker for Monet's waterlilies; Fragonard's studio portraits (some of the first and best moments of abstraction); Boucher's artificiality; Ingres's fabrics; Chardin's broche...

'Purgation' segment of his 1987 *Dante Quartet*. Though the underlying footage may be incidental, it's worth noting that Brakhage's paint swirls are layered over the classic Hollywood repentant prostitute, who fades in like a bleached ghost, before being drowned out again under a Pollock-like assertion of paint's materiality. Moreover, Brakhage's Irma is trapped in purgatory, while Teplin's Garbo, as traitor-whore Mata Hari, has been altered so that gold paint extends her hair into a ray of celestial light.

The subtitle of Teplin's recent Gavlak show was *The Suicide Twins*, culled from a Victorian-era French newspaper she displayed on the gallery wall, a colour illustration of two girls holding hands as they plunge into a river. On the lower right-hand corner she'd pencilled 'l'armour c'est fou' (speaking of unreadable signs). But perhaps *amour* and *amour* can be read as etymologically and thematically Siamesed here, love and protection as apposite and opposite, each negating the other, just as each twin negates the other in their suicide pact. Extended to the realm of fashion, *amour/armour* is the hallmark contradiction of a 70s-era Yves Saint Laurent dress: its front a ruffled, neck-high fortress, its back a constant threat of slinky collapse into nudity. Vulnerability stitched into the

dress, as it is into the tenuous contract of love. 'Every fashion is to some extent a bitter satire on love,' wrote Walter Benjamin. He compared fashion's endless cycle of renewal to Lethe, a river that slakes memory with forgetting – which is necessary to love as well, so that each new lover, in a serial succession, materializes as pure novelty.

'I like to think of Mata Hari and Odette committing suicide together before they were "stoned",' Teplin says. Her sculpture *Odette's Vanity Fair* (2005), a kind of pan-courtesan tribute, consists of an eighteenth-century bonnet with illusion veil, and a nineteenth-century costume – strange, bodiless accoutrements displayed on a plinth surrounded by folds of off-white felt. In the second volume of *In Search of Lost Time*, Proust describes Odette's clothing as emanating 'repressed hints' and 'faint whispers' of 'monkey jackets', 'follow-me-lad hat ribbons' and 'bows and bodices' of earlier eras – effects 'that no real seamstress or milliner could have contrived'. Teplin works by day for a milliner, but her artistic practice is closer to the milieu of repressed hints and faint whispers, and the ways in which sewn, powdered and painted surfaces might all be satires on love, but perhaps not bitter ones. 'A really good painting,' Teplin wrote to me, 'is like the rush of falling in love without any fear of being rejected. And honestly, what could be better than that?' ●