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Interview

SERVANE MARY IN LOS ANGELES, SEPTEMBER 2015.
PORTRAITS: CARA ROBBINS



Appropriated images continuously appear within the realm of contemporary art, with each artist finding a unique approach. For French-born, Brooklyn-based Servane Mary that approach is finding striking women's portraiture published between the 1940s and 1970s. Although Mary began as a painter in Paris, when she moved to New York six years ago her practice dramatically shifted to focus solely on the image rather than the process. Since then, her appropriated works have taken the forms of images printed on mylar rescue blankets and pieces of silk, as well as glow-in-the-dark pigment on walls. Last night, "American Cowgirls of the American 1940s" opened at Kayne Griffin Corcoran in Los Angeles, exposing Mary's latest endeavor: sculpture.



In the exhibit, j-shaped pieces of glass lie on the floor with various cowgirl images adhered to the surface. One singular tapestry dangles from the ceiling, while glass columns stand upright with images twisting around the exterior, conveying a sense of narrative. Other pieces, like forcefully bent plexiglas and narrowly twisted glass distort and deconstruct the surface images. Each piece is untitled, save for a minor descriptor in parenthesis. Mary's research process is image-based, as she scours the internet to find the most compelling photographs both historically and aesthetically, choosing to leave text behind.

"The content is here in the piece," Mary explains when we meet her at her shared studio in Williamsburg. "I don't give another explanation."

In terms of building an image archive, Mary's work could perhaps reflect that of Gerhard Richter and certain semblances of Barbara Kruger, Cady Nolan, and Richard Prince can also be seen. The two-floor warehouse space is split between Olivier Mosset (a founder of the BMPT movement), Virginia Overton, and Mary, whose bookshelves are filled with a rare collection of classic literature printed in the 18th century as well as philosophical and art historical books.

"I've been reading lately a lot of [Georges] Didi-Huberman, a French philosopher," she says with a slight accent. "He wrote incredible books [about] all images from the Second World War and how they were used and the impact they can have on our generation. I've been very influenced by him."

Just before the artist left New York for the installation process, we spoke with her about the show and her practice.

EMILY MCDERMOTT: The cover of a cowgirl on *Life* magazine inspired this series, right?

SERVANE MARY: The cover is one of the photos I'm using, [but] the series started when I found some pieces of glass that were curved in the "J" shape on the floor. At the same time I had this material, I started looking at the images of cowgirls. After I made bigger freestanding glass pieces in the "J" shape—we made it in a glass factory in Red Hook—then I used plexiglass and then I found imagery of cowgirls in the '40s. But there's a group of images that are from *Life* magazine. They're from 40-something and the photographer was commissioned to go and take photos of a group of cowgirls, doing the job of the men. It was the war era.

MCDERMOTT: So all of the women were working in the factories, taking over what were traditionally men's jobs.

MARY: Right, so I have a whole group of these images. They're going to be all kinds of curved pieces, tubes, and one fabric banner. It's the first time I've worked with three-dimensional pieces. It was really interesting because it was really getting into the sculptography area; I've never done that before. It includes both characteristics of photography and sculpture.

MCDERMOTT: What made you want to introduce the three-dimensional element?

MARY: It was doing research. I've always worked with images that, for me, are as much [like a] material as whatever holds the image. Even with the tapestries, it's not sculptural, but they can hang from a ceiling in the middle of a space. For these images of the Second World War printed on rescue blankets, the process was kind of complicated. For a technical restriction, I had to cut the image, cut the blanket, and print each part of the image separately on my small inkjet printer. The laser printer wouldn't print on that material; it's not meant to be printed. At the end, it became this patchwork piece. It was a way to deconstruct the image and put it back together. The image became as materialized as the material that holds it.

So then going into sculpture was a very natural way to explore the possibility of the images. They stretch around the tube, so it becomes volume; it's not only the flat image anymore. Each time I try to mount the image, the image has to make sense in relation to the shape of the glass or plexiglass. It's like a story goes around a tube.

MCDERMOTT: You said the glass is made in Red Hook, but what's the printing process like?

MARY: I have different printing processes. Some are inkjet prints on window film protection that are mounted on tubes. I also have pieces printed on adhesive Mylar, mounted on the glass or plexiglass. I have another material, perforated adhesive mylar. The window film was very interesting, because this is what you use on windows to protect from the heat, so you can see through the image. All of the pieces have a back and a front. The image in the back becomes more abstract, but you can see through the piece and kind of see the image.

MCDERMOTT: What was the research process like for these images?

MARY: I go on the internet and I collect whatever image is interesting to me. It's like building an archive. Then I pick out the one that is the most powerful. I always had this idea of the gender of an image, an image being feminine—like the Medusa effect, it has this desire—and the person looking at the image being more male.

For the cowgirls, I think I started research in November. I did the first two pieces for a small show called "OMM," with Virginia Overton, myself, and Olivier Mosset. Olivier Mosset was one of the founders of BMPT, so it was his idea to title the show with our initials. We've done many shows together. We're doing one when I'm back from Los Angeles. We invited two other people, so it's going to be called the "MOMMA" show. It's going to be for two weeks in Southold, because I have a place in Long Island. There's this guy who runs a hardware store, but half of the shop is for guitars and music instruments, and he invited us to do a show in his space next door.

So anyway, that was the beginning of it, "OMM." We did a small show in a space on Eldridge Street. All the shows we've done, except maybe the first two, they're not organized by galleries. We decided we had to do it ourselves. So, I had those two pieces, I started doing the research in November, and regarding the space in Los Angeles, which has wonderful light, I decided to go for the sculptures.

MCDERMOTT: Is there anything specific you learned from this new technique?

MARY: The way I work, usually, is that I work on a series, a body of work, for two or three years. Like the tapestries—it started with one single image on rescue blanket, and then it got bigger and bigger. Then I went into three dimensions. So I started small, with little models, to understand how I could relate an image to a shape—what a tube would do to an image. I would make models, then do the piece full-scale. But it was always taking me someplace else. You have all these restrictions and material.

MCDERMOTT: Looking at the tapestries, it reminds me very much of quilting, especially with your patchwork reference. It expands upon the issue of femininity that's addressed through the images themselves.

MARY: Absolutely. And you know, during the war, women in the U.S. were sending quilts and blankets to the soldiers. It makes even more sense for the piece in relation to the

image. It is patchwork. I call them tapestries probably just because of the size and the way they could hang on the wall or in the middle of a space. But the process, most of the time, you can see an alteration of the image, a deterioration. Every part of the image is totally abstract. It's really by putting the pieces together that the image becomes visible again. There are lines from the printer, it's almost painted, and I like that quality. It wouldn't print very well. It wouldn't dry...

MCDERMOTT: Can you tell me about the one tube that has blue and red stripes instead of an image?

MARY: I was trying to make a banner. That drove me crazy for three months. I wanted the idea of a flag in the show. I was obsessed with the flag and the stripes, so at the end I decided to remove the image from the column and just have the stripes—the white being the negative space, and then you have the blue and the red circles and nothing in the middle. It's the first time I've done such a piece.

MCDERMOTT: It's very abstract for you.

MARY: Yeah, totally, like a little round Donald Judd. [*laughs*] And I didn't intend it to! Just at the end, when it was standing, I was like, "Oh wow..."

MCDERMOTT: I also want to go back to the very beginning. How did first you become interested in appropriating images?

MARY: I used to be a painter, a long time ago. I studied in Paris at the *Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs*—I say it in French, sorry. [*laughs*] I was in the painting department. Out of school I continued the painting practice for a while, until I moved to New York six years ago. Then I stopped painting because it didn't make sense anymore. It was not the practice that was interesting to me; it was the image. So I found a faster and easier way to work with the image. Instead of painting it was printing. So I abandoned painting and focused on the image and how the image could be refigured in another way.

MCDERMOTT: Do you ever take photos?

MARY: No, no, no. It's not my concern.

MCDERMOTT: Aside from leaving painting behind, how else did moving to New York impact you as an artist?

MARY: I met a lot of interesting people and that maybe forced me to look at everything with new eyes. I was working in a very traditional way in Paris, still with women portraiture, but coming to New York was very exciting. And it's still very exciting.

"Servane Mary: American Cowgirls of the 1940s" will be on view at Kayne Griffin Corcoran through October 24. For more on the artist, visit her website.

-Emily McDermott