

The Old Hags Are Laughing: A Response to Outrageous Agers

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*[T]he ageing woman is not as old as she feels; she does not feel the change in herself; rather, she is as old as others see her.'*¹

Desexualised, sagging, undesirable, troublesome: the body of the old(er) woman remains largely unseen and neglected by popular culture. In this new exhibition, Rosy Martin and Kay Goodridge enter into and subvert conventional stereotypes of the older woman using irony, parody and transgression to challenge the cultural invisibility of the ageing female body. Here, the ageing woman is represented as active, malleable, shifting and flexible; indeed, functional in every respect. The role of photography is shown to be central in developing an aesthetics of ageing and, by using a variety of techniques and sources, Martin and Goodridge confront the ageing issue head-on. Furthermore, their work highlights the notable absence of older women as practitioners and subjects in the history of art.

In the fashion and cosmetics world, only the most glamorous and well-preserved older women earn their place in advertising campaigns; for example, the recent TV advertisement for Oil of Olay aimed specifically at women in their fifties and Marks and Spencers winter 1999 promotion featuring older (and beautiful) male and female models. In a series of photographs shot in the changing rooms of the high-street store Top Shop, Martin and Goodridge engage with and perform the stereotype of mutton dressed as lamb by trying on a range of trendy clubwear in sequins, leopard-skin print and PVC. The combination of bare flesh and stretched fabric creates a sense of discomfort and unease (a fabricated self?) as they force their bodies to fit within fashions parameters. Ironically, this is anything but a changing room - the true contours of the body can never fully be disguised by clothes. But there is also a sense of carnivalesque fun which derives from the ambiguity of the images as well as the telling gestural acts: in one shot we see bum and thighs squeezed into a harsh-looking black PVC tight skirt and boob tube, and in another, the revealing plunge of a lycra dress is complimented by tendrils of hair, thus fitting an altogether more conventional fashion frame. The montage- style images, mounted as light-boxes, parody current fashion photography's techniques and angles which tend to focus equally on the textures, colours and movement of the fabric and the fragmented body of the model. The function of the mirror is also significant with its associations of scrutiny, vanity and beauty as well as its more traditional link with self-portraiture. The mirror serves two other important functions: to reinforce the act of looking, both on the behalf of the viewer as voyeur inside the changing room, and the artist as (fashion) model and photographer, and to highlight the performative nature of the images i.e. trying on youth.

The Top Shop images become more highly charged when viewed in relation to the frieze of bodyscapes. Interestingly, the artists real bodies are presented as a continuum in contrast to the fragmented snapshots inside the changing room. The difference between these gorgeous bodyscapes and the bodies squeezed uncomfortably into inappropriate clothes is startling. The use of double exposures highlights the notion of becoming an old(er) woman, as the body continually shifts and undergoes a series of changes and modifications e.g. grey hair, wrinkles etc.. Here we see layers of skin and body parts - bellies, chins, hair, eyes - merging into each other to create a sense of the unstable, ever changing body². The act of looking at the undulating folds and contours of the skin becomes pleasurable and manifold, as though the artists are playfully interrogating our assumptions of how the ageing female body should appear (according to narrowly defined stereotypes). By juxtaposing a visual exploration of how it feels and looks to inhabit an ageing body

with a sense of liberation (corporeal, aesthetic and political), Martin and Goodridge question the stigma of growing old, which so often becomes a process of de-eroticization under the gaze of contemporary society. Furthermore, by engaging with the dynamics of representing the old(er) female nude, the absence of the older woman in visual art is challenged. Within a patriarchal frame, only the smooth, healthy body is considered an appropriate body type for art: anything other than this is out of bounds/monstrous. As Joanna Frueh remarks: 'The old(er) woman is doubly different, doubly degraded, and doubly injured by exterior identity: she is visibly female, different from men, and visibly aging, even when cosmetically altered, different from the young.'³

In a series of scripto-visual works, an interesting conjunction between theory and practice takes place as Martin and Goodridge project theoretical texts onto their bodies. The fact that not all of the text is visible is conceptually significant: the distortion of the text mirrors the disruptive and excessive body that is pictured before us. The confrontation between real flesh and a text such as David Reuben's diatribe on the rapid decline of the older woman is a particularly challenging image as the body effectively swallows the words whole. The authority of such normative and clinical statements is undermined by the presence of a body that is both dynamic and demanding: flesh overpowers word. The artists have also been careful to select affirmative texts to balance the more reductive excerpts, and use them in intriguing ways; for example, a paragraph from Luce Irigaray's 'This Sex Which is Not One' is cleverly projected in such a way that the word 'play' is caught in the mirror thereby raising issues of mimesis, visibility and reflection.

Shifting from the scripto-visual image to video, Martin and Goodridge further complicate the notion of the ageing nude by performing an outrageous striptease entitled 'What d'ya think you're looking at?'. Several key words spring immediately to mind: riotous, positive, powerful and, of course, outrageous. They enter an all white room, which mirrors the white cube gallery space, dressed in obligatory, ubiquitous black clothes. As the layers of clothing are seductively peeled off, so too the viewer is seduced by the layers of visual and sound effects that combine to produce a challenging and memorable performance. Their gestures and poses mirror and subvert the striptease act: they look at each other, and then directly at the camera; they caress the contours of their bodies and teasingly remove items of clothing. Martin hums and sings 'The Stripper' throughout, bawdy at first and then slowing down to a rhythmic gasp which evokes an excited heartbeat. Meanwhile, Goodridge remains mostly silent which provides an interesting contrast. Underneath their multiple layers of black clothing lies a further visual twist; both are wearing lengths of tubi-grip on their arms and legs. Usually connected to notions of the broken, unhealthy body, the tubi-grip acts as a second skin and performs a sensual, erotic function akin to Victorian silk stockings. Most significantly, they are both laughing which firmly roots this performance in the tradition of the carnivalesque with its associations of risk and excess as the artists reveal themselves, literally, to the audience. What is most appealing is that they look and sound as if they are enjoying themselves, as though they are revelling in peeling off the stigma of old age.

The second part of 'What d'ya think you're looking at?' engages directly with the dangers of exposure. This is a confrontational piece that shows Martin and Goodridge moving towards the camera, asking the viewer what they think they are looking at (a deliciously ambiguous question), until only their mouths appear pressed up against the lens, disembodied and distorted. There is a double implication here of the artists exposing themselves in the style of a flasher and also in terms of exposing the ageing, 'othered' body to the audience. The effect is to make the viewer feel uncomfortable, as if we are invading their space. The final video piece shows the two artists dancing

wildly around a room, naked, and singing 'When you're smiling'. Traditional poses such as masking the pubic area are utterly subverted. This is in-your-face nudity that creates a mood of liberation and riotous fun.

This exhibition marks out new ground in a continuing debate concerning the position of the old(er) woman in contemporary art and society, and leads the audience to question what it might mean to act your age. Curiously, very few women artists, particularly painters, are working with images of the ageing female body. However, there seems to be an affinity between photography and representing the ageing body which perhaps stems from their mutual associations of mirroring versus reality. Women photographers such as Anne Noggle, Jacqueline Hayden, Melanie Manchot and Cindy Sherman are all exploring the aesthetics of ageing in very different ways. Significantly, Martin and Goodridge, like Noggle, turn the camera on themselves rather than photographing other aged bodies. As viewers and inhabitants of ageing bodies, their practice establishes an intimate connection between the subject and the process of self-representation. This heightened sense of engagement with the embodied subject must surely be crucial in any attempt at re-framing the old(er) woman in visual art.

1. Pearsall, M. (ed) *The Other Within Us: Feminist Explorations of Women and Aging* (Oxford: Westview Press, 1997) p.3.
2. *Outrageous Agers: A Collaboration Between Rosy Martin and Kay Goodridge* (Light House, press release/artists' statement).
3. Frueh, J. *Visible Difference: Women Artists and Aging* in Pearsall. M. p.202

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