

Louise Darblay on Kate Mackeson's 'Sirens'

“Were you listening to me Neo, or were you looking at the woman in the red dress?” Morpheus asks a naïve Keanu Reeves as he starts his training to move beyond the illusion of the Matrix. Of course Neo was looking at the woman in her glamorous long dress, with her matching vermilion lipstick. His is an almost atavistic response to the archetype of the ‘woman in red’ – one that can be traced as far back as the Whore of Babylon, the original Scarlet Woman, mother of all evils, both feared and adored – a representation so deeply ingrained it has become universal. In Neo’s training, she stands for our pre-programmed ‘choices’ and social conditioning, a reminder of how certain images and representations shape our imagination, our desires, and our fears. This is also what Kate Mackeson’s Sirens seem to aspire to: to interrogate and unpack, albeit in a more intuitive and perhaps obsessive manner, a haunting motif in the artist’s (and our collective) imaginary. Half-women, half-architecture, these sculptures appear to have been carved out of Escher-esque dreamscapes, like residual fragments of the artist’s unconscious made manifest. In reality, the images were patiently amassed by the artist on her desktop, before being blown up and integrated into aluminium structures, then alternately mirrored, cut, bent or punctured – a tentative exercise in deconstruction that sits somewhere between a maieutic and a therapeutic process.

Mackeson’s Sirens have been on her mind for a while. Her installation *Fugue State* (2016) includes two proto-versions of the sculptures, except in smaller scale and featuring printed images of two fictional characters from the gothic black comedy classic *Death Becomes Her* (1992): Meryl Streep and Goldie Hawn, the former wearing a silky red dress but with her head twisted backwards, and the other resuscitating zombie-like from a pool red with her own blood, a giant hole in the place of her stomach. Positioned onto a metallic tray table and separated by what looks like a sea of fish skeletons, the two figures seem to speak to the conflicted nature of desire and beauty and its inherent evocation of death and the abject: the ebb and flow of attraction and repulsion. As they gestated in the artist’s mind, these earlier apparitions morphed into free-standing, larger-scale sculptures that continue to mine that ambiguous in-between under the guise of sirens: after all, what better evocation of female monstrosity and the explosive cocktail of attraction and repulsion than these mythical creatures, known for using their seductive voices to lure seafaring men to their island of bones? ‘The female body shares with the monster the privilege of bringing out a unique blend of fascination and horror,’ writes Rosi Braidotti in her 1994 essay ‘Mother, Monsters, Machines’. It is, she adds, a ‘fundamental structure of the mechanism of desire’.

What makes the Sirens seductive lies in a form of deceptive evidence: as you walk among them, the seemingly familiar and universal trope of the ‘woman in red’ becomes an object of scrutiny. What are we reading into it? What do we assume? And what happens, as is the case in this latest series of Sirens, when we transfer those readings from cinema to real world politics?

Jessica Rabbit and Julia Roberts in *Pretty Woman*, who formed earlier Sirens, have now left their place to female singers, actors and politicians, further complicating any straightforward readings: when Laverne Cox or Rihanna don red dresses, do they play into unconscious gender expectations about seduction or are they putting a deliberate spin on a male fantasy? Is this a form of emancipation through reappropriation and resignification? The red suits of politicians like Angela Merkel, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez or Elise Stefanik are likely meant as an assertive gesture of power and dominance in the political arena, but are they meant to invite fear and desire too? Power is to be found precisely in those murky waters, the Sirens seem to whisper.

But perhaps the Sirens can be better understood by what Mackeson describes as posturing: an attention to a physical or philosophical positioning, reflecting on the body as a site of conditioning but also resistance and identity. In previous works, it manifests itself in the evocation of bodily and spiritual fatigue (or is it indolence?) in the slouching padded mats of Mackeson's *Armours*, held into position by fastening straps; or the tortured expressions of the medieval figures sewn into various pairs of trousers (*Moods*, 2019), like bodies trapped into their own attributes; or the allusions to gestures of self-care in the form of wax replicas of cotton pads, toothbrushes and other cosmetic objects. In the *Sirens*, the posturing points to the ambiguous intentions projected onto a motif like the red dress. But while the body remains a central presence in Mackeson's work, it is more often hinted at than ever fully present, conjured by way of metonymy in motifs, attributes, accessories. A certain lateral approach to both the subject and the work which coaxes us – and here Morpheus might approve – into a second look, beyond the evidence.

Louise Darblay is an editor and writer based in London.