



MARIANNE LOVINK'S ARCADIA

by Russell Smith

Marianne Lovink's objects are androgynously sexual: they swell almost to bursting in embarrassing ways; they have obscene protuberances. And yet their knots, knobs, humps and nubs are constrained here and there, by tight bands, narrowings, sometimes by fine black patterns suggestive of hosiery – a bit of fishnet here, a stretch of lace there. And where they do split, erupt into flower or stamen, they reveal lurid red seams, startling vermilion veins like painted lips or eyes.

Despite their s/m evocations – vulnerable innards constricted by black ornament – they are exuberant, ingenuous: they interact, floating in their ovoid cluster, with a kind of flirtation, in an amoebic courtship dance, proudly revealing their offshoots, their fleshy sprays, like so much exotic plumage. They are lures to each other.

A biologist's term for this indiscriminate availability would be panmictic: breeding randomly with other members of a population, giving no preference to traits.

Panmixia – this state of constant random mating – sounds like a good way to describe Lovink's process as well. The materials she gathers and extrudes to create these bulbous and flowering shapes have always been a mix of the organic and the highly processed. She has made branch-like statues from empty glass bottles and plastic jugs; she has spun medical-grade artificial skin into nebulae of tendrils that are neither exactly floral nor exactly amoebic, on the line between the decorative and the medical, the natural and the toxic. Her metal work is delicately filigreed, more neural network than cold steel. A series of bicycle posts she made for the City of Toronto look like trees, or rather the spores that might float from trees in a cartoon landscape set some time in the future, a time when trees bubble from sidewalks like liquid soap.

Speaking of bubbling, are those perhaps trumpets that flower up from their shiny skins? Will they make a noise, either plaintive or giggly? Or are those flowering horns merely ears, listening for the proximity of their heterogeneous counterparts?

In what unreal environment do such basic and friendly organisms flourish? Well, in Arcadia – Arcady -- a mythical rural region of simple pleasures and peace, a magical place inhabited by shepherds in love, painted obsessively by realists since at least the Baroque era. Arcady as represented by Guercino and Poussin, though, is not a purely threat-free space: there's always a skull or a grave hiding somewhere in Arcady, a shadow of death to frighten innocent shepherds and remind them that their time here too will be finite.

And there are reminders of the human world in Lovink's fantastic, non-gendered objects too. The black tracery that covers their pristine white carapaces is strangely austere for such Dionysian shapes. It looks almost like the representational systems of science – its classifications, its diagrams – rather than those of nature.

This tension – between the natural world and the sterile conditions of its representations on pages and screens – is recurrent in Lovink's sculpture. The graphic representation of data, particularly in black and white, has its own abstract geometry, a kind of accidental Op Art. (She has titled a previous exhibition "Unnatural Order".) It is as if the scientist's schematization of these objects' neural circuitry is printed on their

bodies. Those relentlessly civilized patterns are here superimposed on shapes that are unregulatable: systems of knowledge fighting bodies of knowledge, the arborescent against the rhizomoid, branches against roots. Here systems and order merely adorn sex and entropy.

This simple yet obsessive ornamentation carries references to other purely human vernaculars as well, from Islamic mosaics to tribal tattoos. Even their spare palette, their porcelain-white surfaces, echo calligraphy, or the black boundaries around line drawings in graphic novels. The objects then are tantalizingly *almost* from our civilization.

The addition of bright red to this palette is new in Lovink's oeuvre. It disrupts the ascetic aestheticism of black and white like cautions, as if those red bands and buttons are not to be touched. (Red buttons always taunt us. What happens if I press the red button?) This colour's gaudiness is almost tacky, a rude reminder of heat below the laboratory surface, possible pain in these swollen probes and plugs. For although there are no clouds in Arcady, although there is pure joy, there is always always an end to joy invisibly inscribed, a livid warning somewhere: *et in Arcadia ego*. ■

Writer Russell Smith's most recent novel, *Girl Crazy*, is being adapted for cinema by New Real Films of Toronto. He writes weekly on the arts in the *Globe and Mail*.

Artist Marianne Lovink is a Canadian sculptor, currently based in Philadelphia, USA. She received a BFA (*Hons*) from *Queen's University*, Kingston, Ontario and spent time as an artist-in-residence at *The Banff Centre* in Alberta. Lovink has an extensive exhibition history in both public and commercial galleries and has participated in Art Fairs in Canada, the United States and Europe. She has been the recipient of numerous arts council grants and has recently completed several large-scale site-specific public art projects. Her works can be found in both public and private collections. She is represented by *Olga Korper Gallery* in Toronto and *Jennifer Kostuik Gallery* in Vancouver.



Marianne Lovink's exhibition ARCADIA is on view at Gallery Stratford until July 14, 2013.



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