

Hadassah Emmerich – The Great Ephemeral Skin

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1. The libidinous body

‘Open the so-called body and spread out all its surfaces: not only the skin with each of its folds, wrinkles, scars, [...] the scalp and its mane of hair, the tender pubic fur, nipples, nails, hard transparent skin under the heel, the light frills of the eyelids, set with lashes – but open and spread, expose the labia majora, so also the labia minora with their blue network bathed in mucus [...] as though your dressmaker’s scissors were opening the leg of an old pair of trousers. [...] Don’t forget to add to the tongue and all the pieces of the vocal apparatus all the sounds of which they are capable, and moreover, the whole selective network of sounds, that is, the phonological system, for this too belongs to the libidinal ‘body’. [...] All these zones are joined end to end in a band which has no back to it, a Moebius band, which interests us not because it is closed, but because it is one-sided.’¹

So begins ‘The Great Ephemeral Skin’, the first chapter of Jean-François Lyotard’s *Libidinal Economy* (1974), an extraordinarily difficult (if not unreadable) book in which the postmodern French philosopher marries the ideas of Freud, Marx and capitalism. The opening passages might serve equally well as a description of the recent work of Hadassah Emmerich. It is therefore no coincidence that Emmerich has given the exhibition of her new series of works, presented for the first time at De Garage in Mechelen in March 2019, the title *The Great Ephemeral Skin*. Body and identity, the sensory and sensual, the commodification of the erotic and the exotic: these are themes that recur frequently in Emmerich’s work. However, never before have her images been so explicitly

¹ Jean-François Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, originally published in French in 1974, translated by Iain Hamilton Grant, Indiana University Press, 1993, pp. 1-3.

sexual and directly concerned with the female body and simultaneously so abstract. The series of new works therefore marks, in the artist's words, a new phase in her artistic practice.

2. Cold Shoulders

In fact this new phase began three years ago with a new technique. As a painter, Emmerich was always preoccupied with a form of expanded painting, experimenting with different kinds of paint and application techniques, but from 2016 she developed a new way of painting with stencils. She applied this technique fully for the first time in the five-part work *Cold Shoulder Series* (2016), in which she cut shapes from vinyl flooring, rolled printer's ink or oil paint onto them in graduated bands of colour and then impressed them on canvas, paper or the wall. In the *Cold Shoulder Series*, we see various printed layers of paint over a painting in ink. The combination of the thin, fluid ink painting with the thick, compact oil paint produces an interesting tension. Transparent and opaque layers alternate, with in some places an additional intermediate layer of oil pastel, applied as a kind of buffer. Alongside flat, graphic passages, there are visual elements that have a spatial and plastic appearance. And all of this in five variations, each with a different colour combination. The five-part work is a collage of assorted printed elements.

The most striking and recognisable element in the *Cold Shoulder Series* is a gently rounded shoulder. Above it we see a head, turned away in profile, that resembles a 'primitive' mask, and a mane of black hair that glistens like a vinyl record. The image is borrowed from the packaging of a hair dye that the artist encountered in a local market in Curaçao. What fascinated her about the packaging was the model: instead of using a different model for each hair colour, the packaging for each dye colour features the same model photoshopped with a different hair

colour. Neither the model nor the packaging are recognisable as such in the paintings, but Emmerich copied both the pose and the idea of the repetition. An advantage of working with stencils is the ability to re-use certain visual elements. Emmerich is interested in the formal, material aspects of this as well as the conceptual significance of repetition, reproduction, imitation and mirroring. Repeating the composition five times in a variety of colour combinations – in which the model changes not only her hair colour but also her skin tone – results in images that are almost the same, but not quite.

3. Almost the same, but not quite

In theoretical terms, this practice can be related to the notion of ‘almost the same, but not quite’ developed by Homi K. Bhabha, a pioneering Indian theorist of post-colonialism. In his essay ‘Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse’ (1984), he analyses the position occupied by foreigners who have attempted to integrate completely within Western society. According to Bhabha, a fundamental paradox arises in the coloniser’s position in relation to the colonised subject: the coloniser wants to civilise the colonised subject, making him more like himself, but a certain difference must remain in order to legitimise the coloniser’s ‘superiority’. The colonial discourse thus produces subjects that are almost the same, but not quite.²

This connects with Emmerich’s personal background and her interest in the complexity of the construction of identity when cultures merge. Born in the Netherlands, raised in a village in Catholic Limburg as a non-Catholic, with a Chinese-Indonesian father and a German mother, Emmerich knows what it is like to be viewed as an outsider. She knows what it means to be judged

² Homi K. Bhabha, ‘Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse’, *October*, vol. 28, 1984, pp. 125-133.

because of your origins, the colour of your skin, your external appearance, and to feel the tension between how others see you and how you experience yourself. Since she was a student at the Academy of Fine Arts in Maastricht (1993-97) and her subsequent studies at the Higher Institute for Fine Arts, then in Antwerp (1997-2000), and Goldsmiths College in London (2003-05), she has been fascinated by the antagonism between external form and internal experience, mainly because there is no longer an 'original identity' when cultures and identities flow together – or at least only an 'original' whose hierarchy is repeatedly questioned by new outsiders.

In the first instance, Emmerich focuses artistically on the seduction of the exterior, the image, the packaging. An overarching theme in her work is the predilection for the exotic 'other', with its ramifications in orientalism, primitivism, fetishism and the erotic. Both the *Cold Shoulder Series* and the works she presented in 2016 under the title *Contre-Jour* allude to the aestheticising manner in which 'exotic' women's bodies are depicted. In the *Contre-Jour* works, Emmerich refers literally to Paul Facchetti's *Nus exotiques* from the 1950s: a book of images of naked black women photographed with a stark contrast between light and dark in order to emphasise their sensual forms and 'mysterious' atmosphere. But, of course, Emmerich's reference is not without critical reflection. Whereas photographers such as Facchetti employ a polarised perspective, with an exotic object on the one hand and a non-exotic viewer (who can freely project his fantasies onto the object) on the other, Emmerich undermines an unequivocal perspective, replacing it with a viewpoint and an aesthetic that are ambiguous and multifaceted. Her colourful canvases display titillating breasts and legs, but the façade of the body conceals an interior world of hidden desires. Unlike the exoticising 'male gaze', in Emmerich's works there is also room for

female desires. The one-way traffic of the gaze is further complicated by this subject who returns the gaze with her own desires, but who may also have partially internalised the perspective of the 'coloniser', mixed with 'authentic' and 'original' characteristics – whatever they might be.

4. Obscene abstraction

In the past three years, Emmerich has developed the technique of printing with vinyl stencils further. An important step in this development was the commission for a new wall painting in the Dutch Embassy in Jakarta, where she applied the stencil technique for the first time on a large scale on a wall. For the three floors of the embassy building, each fifteen metres wide, Emmerich designed three different compositions in which she transforms Indonesian batik motifs into physical and spatial figures.

Interestingly, the new wall painting in the embassy, which Emmerich completed in September 2018, adjoins a wall painting that she made twelve years earlier. Old and new works thus come together and show how the artist has developed.

The painting from 2006 is a sumptuous, ornamental scene with all manner of botanical motifs and winding liana, executed in bright tropical colours. Thematically it is related to the series *With Love from Batik Babe* (2005) in which forms, colours, texts and meanings tumble over each other, as if in a veritable jungle. Or as curator and writer Roel Arkesteijn wrote at the time: 'Looking at Emmerich's work is [...] an almost dazzling, hallucinatory experience'.³ What is striking about the new painting is that the motifs are greatly enlarged and abstracted and call to mind body parts rather than exotic plants or flowers. The stencil technique

³ 'Het bekijken van Emmerichs werk is (...) een bijna duizelingwekkende, hallucinerende ervaring.' Roel Arkesteijn, 'Verboden Vruchten', *With Love From Batik Babe*, GEM Museum of Contemporary Art, The Hague 2005, p.56

with its graduated bands of colour gives the figures an airbrushed effect. It gives them volume and accentuates their sensual curves. As voluptuous volumes, they twist upwards and downwards in sinuous curves and spirals against a bright-blue, soft-yellow or light-pink background like an immense membrane, a Moebius band that rotates endlessly around its only surface.

This brings us back to 'The Great Ephemeral Skin', Lyotard's text and Emmerich's eponymous exhibition. Specially for De Garage in Mechelen, Emmerich made not only a series of new works on canvas and paper but also a monumental polyptych and a new wall painting. Together they form an extremely erotic universe. We see raised up knees, buttocks, breasts, spread legs and phallic forms like the pistils of a flower that penetrate wrinkled openings. The fragmented body parts are sharply cut, like graphic silhouettes, but also have a voluminous character. The figures' cylindrical construction and metallic effect calls to mind the work of Fernand Léger. Like this French Cubist, Emmerich reduces the human body to geometric forms: legs become tubes, buttocks become reflective spheres, genitalia become ovals. Everything seems plastic and three-dimensional, but is, in fact, rendered on a flat surface. 'Obscene abstraction' someone called it, a description that Emmerich accepts, with the addition that, for her, the intimacy of the subject coincides with the intimacy or physical proximity and depth of painterly space.

5. Feminist Pop erotica

The obscenity of the new work is played out not only on the surface of the (erotic) images, but also in their mechanical repetition. For example, the woman's body bent double in the work *Zigzag Nudes* (2019) is reproduced in five different skin tones, presented to the viewer in a neat stack: a skin colour for every taste. Emmerich consciously uses the strategy of repetition

to give the images a certain anonymity and distance. In this way she both imitates and criticises the way in which women's bodies are transformed into commodities in advertising and pornography.

Her strategy is related to that of Pop art, in particular several women Pop artists. To this day, the female representatives of this movement remain relatively unknown and overshadowed by their male colleagues. We know Pop art primarily as an American invention of white, male artists such as Jasper Johns, Roy Lichtenstein, Robert Rauschenberg and Andy Warhol: artists who addressed consumer society with a certain political coolness, and made use of new materials and industrial techniques. But there were also women Pop artists, not only in America but also in other parts of the world: artists such as Evelyn Axell, Beatriz González, Kiki Kogelnik, Marisol, Marta Minujín and Martha Rosler. With their feminist, multicultural and politically engaged practices, these artists undermine the existing image of Pop art or at least expand its boundaries with a broader and more inclusive perspective. Emmerich discovered the artists in 2016 at the exhibition *The World Goes Pop* at Tate Modern in London, where she was particularly impressed by the works of Evelyn Axell and Kiki Kogelnik. With a critical eye on the male-dominated art scenes, both artists interrogated the depiction of the female body in popular culture – often as pin-up or pornographic nude – and sought the liberation of female sexuality. You could call their work a kind of feminist Pop erotica.

One of Kogelnik's works in particular has proved to be an important source of inspiration for Emmerich. In the work *Friends* (1971), an elongated painting almost seven metres wide, the bodies of men, women and children hang like flaccid, empty sheaths on a washing line. A few years earlier, Kogelnik had experimented with these empty bodies by cutting silhouettes from

sheets of coloured plastic and suspending them as sculptures. Kogelnik's work resonates in a new sculptural work by Emmerich. Although she had always practised a kind of expanded painting, in which her paintings sometimes grew into spatial installations, the sculptural is new element in Emmerich's oeuvre. She discovered it when she pinned the stencils that were scattered around her studio to the wall with thumbtacks. Because of the varied (skin) colours used, the collection of stencils evoked associations with skins that have been shed or meat hanging in a butcher's shop. In the exhibition at De Garage, she introduced the vinyl objects for the first time as autonomous spatial sculptures, separated from the wall. Draped over a large support that cut diagonally through the space, the stencils hung like painted pliable 'skins' directly above the visitors' heads.

6. Duplicitous game

At first glance, Emmerich's new works in *The Great Ephemeral Skin* do not appear very female friendly. They approach the female body as an object, dissecting it into distinct body parts, prying the skin open, beheading the body and rendering it completely anonymous. The sensual body becomes a motif that can be repeated until it becomes a pattern. Simultaneously, Emmerich offers the viewer (male and female) real visual pleasure. The stylised, suggestive forms, the intensity of the colours, the sensual agility: in all these things she emphasises the corporeality of the images and their ability to touch us physically or libidiously. In this way she appears to present the viewer with a moral problem: may we derive pleasure from images in which women are presented as a sexualised object? It is the classic feminist dilemma: critique or pleasure, to undermine or to affirm? Strict feminists maintain that only radical criticism of the dominant sexist visual language will lead to change, and they view the

subtler strategy of 'subversive seduction' as complicit in upholding existing sexual power relations.

Hadassah Emmerich does not think in terms of polarities or dilemmas, but instead plays a duplicitous game with the viewer. Referring to the visual idioms of advertising and Pop art, she creates images that both aestheticise and problematise the female body. It is the paradox of simultaneous attraction and repulsion, of intimacy and coolness, of seduction and criticism. The works in *The Great Ephemeral Skin* occupy the space between these sets of polarities. They are neither one thing nor the other – just as the Moebius band turns both inwards and outwards, just as we consist of both an exterior and an interior, just as our bodies are one and all 'libidinousness', without borders. In this way Emmerich succeeds in making the experience of looking truly provocative.