

THE MYTH OF WOMANHOOD YOUTH VERSUS GRAVITY

In her new series of works, 'The Myth of Womanhood', Gretta has returned to a practice that dominated her early career, namely manipulating photographic images of herself to create new and inventive works of art.

However, where in the past, her own image was always central and clearly visible in the finished piece, her new works appear at first glance to be something completely different and it is only after careful examination that you notice the leading role that she plays.

Great works of art demand both close examination and viewing from afar. You want to stand back to admire the composition, effects of light and colour, the way it works as a whole. You go in close to look at the actual marks of the brush on canvas, or the tools on the sculpture, to work out how certain effects have been achieved. For 'The Myth of Womanhood' viewing from both perspectives is essential. Look at the series from a distance and you could be forgiven for thinking that they were photographs of Persian carpets, veneered table tops, mosaic floors. Come up close and you see that the focus of the work is in each case photographs of the artist in various positions which she has manipulated, reflected and then repeated to create a kaleidoscope effect.

In 1979 and 1980 Gretta achieved great acclaim as a performance artist, performing at the Centre Pompidou in Paris amongst other venues. 'The Myth of Womanhood' shows her return to this practice, but here the performance is for the camera alone. Dressed in dramatic outfits, (favorites include a leopard-skin print suit and a black jacket with red fake fur trim on the collar and cuffs), she strikes poses in front of her dressing room mirrors which are positioned to reflect her image in a multitude of angles. Other works show her occupied with more mundane daily chores that reveal the efforts that go into preserving 'The Myth of Womanhood'- cleaning teeth combing hair, putting on make-up.

The series comprises eight photographic paintings on canvas for which Gretta has mounted the photographic prints on canvas and then added a layer of paint to increase the textural qualities of the work. In addition there are 23 different inkjet prints on archival paper, many of which might stem from the same source photograph. For example, the starting point of 'Hands Together A' is an image of Gretta standing with her back to the mirror, her arms outspread and flowers in her hair. For the black and white version, she paints out her head and body leaving her arms to create patterns. Other details are painted out in succeeding prints until we are left with 'Crossarms' which is made up of the reflected images of just one of her arms, repeated to resemble a slightly surreal cross-stitch pattern on a black sampler. Similarly 'Sonata in Red' (illustrated on page 26) is based on a image of Gretta applying mascara in front of a mirror that has been bathed in a rosy light. For 'My Violin', Gretta's removes her face and the mirror alone creates a flower design.

Gretta has created monochromatic versions of several of the prints and declares that these were the most challenging of the works to produce since the tonal differences are much more difficult to get exactly right. 'Sonata' is available in red and orange as well as in purple but otherwise Gretta has manipulated only form and not colour.

Gretta took the photographs herself and then manipulated them at home using the computer package 'PhotoShop'. She was careful to leave in details such as the date stamps on the photographs to emphasise that there has been no cleaning up of the work by professional photographic companies. This lack of vanity is also reflected in the way that Gretta has captured herself. 'In some of the photographs I wanted certain lighting effects to make the shadows darker. This has made my face appear more lined than it is but I am not going to change it' she proudly acknowledges.

Such avant-garde work might surprise viewers who visited Gretta's last two exhibitions in London, 'Reflections of a Woman' held in 1997 and 'The World of Horseracing' in 1999. Having made her name through her performances, video work and photocollages, in the 1990s Gretta took up painting in acrylics. She first created a body of work inspired by the female nude and then recorded the various aspects of horseracing. Despite the use of completely different media there are clear links between these and 'The Myth Womanhood'. As the title implies, all the paintings in the 'Reflections of Woman' series feature women looking at themselves in front of the mirror, with the artist changing the angle at which the mirror is placed in each painting. The horseracing paintings showed varied aspects of the world of horseracing, often capturing unusual scenes and unexpected angles. Gretta admits that she was never entirely comfortable with being a traditional

painter. 'I had just got married and felt that it was the proper thing to do to give up the avant-garde work. I was trying to find my bearings in a new country and was keen to fit in and try and please. Now after 7 years in this country I am completely myself again. I am not so worried about whether people like my work or not.'

When I first met Gretta in 1997 she informed me that she was 'a person of the world'. Born in Greece to an Italian mother and a Greek father, she grew up in Brazil and has lived in Paris, Milan, New York and, for the past seven years, London. Since her marriage to Oriental art expert Richard Marchant she has travelled to the Far East twice a year. The wide range of cultures to which she has been exposed is clearly evident in 'The Myth of Womanhood' as stated above but can also be found in the associated series 'Youth versus Gravity' in which the images viewed from afar resemble Oriental textiles and Islamic tiles. When I mentioned this analogy, Gretta informed me that one of her grandmothers was in fact Turkish.

This Islamic connection applies particularly to a group of works in which a vibrant turquoise blue is the dominant colour and in which a series of star shapes has been formed. However, whereas in Islam these geometric patterns are all important since depictions of the human figure are expressly forbidden, these works are again based on photographs of a figure, in particular Gretta's young grandson. The bright turquoise shades that immediately brought to my mind the decoration on the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem are the colour of water in a tiled swimming pool. The stars are formed by capturing the young boy floating on his back with his legs wide apart and arms straight out or by placing him carefully at an angle at the pool edge.

'Youth versus Gravity' are based on what at first sight might appear to be a sequence of holiday snaps and scenes of everyday life. However, Gretta admits that the photos were carefully posed and that her grandson took to performing for the camera with relish. He has been captured playing the piano, playing with friends, chasing a dog and going to bed. The influence of pop art is evident in 'Pillow War' in which the child wears huge Mickey Mouse slippers. Other images are cluttered with everyday ephemera.

These works are on the whole much more brightly coloured than the 'Myth of Womanhood' series and whilst Gretta declares that the colouring for this series is 'absolutely natural' in many cases she has set up very successful colour combinations to achieve a vivid effect. The little boy is almost always dressed in white to stand out against the colorful interiors. 'Patchworld' features him lying on an emerald green turtle which then lies on top of a flame orange rug. In 'Elveland' the complimentary colours of orange and blue combine to particularly dazzling effect as a row of orange sun parasols stand out against a tropical blue sky.

Gretta is clearly very excited by the new direction that her work has taken and admits that enjoyment that she gets from it is part of the reason for its success, saying 'When you are enjoying yourself, that is when you do good work.' This exhibition includes some origami creations made from the prints, but these are likely to be just one direction that she is going to take this work for she enthuses 'I have another hundred ideas to do.' I for one am looking forward to following future new developments.