

gretta sarfaty: NOT YOUR USUAL GRETTA SARFATY

08.19 – 09. 23.2023

In an interview,¹ Gretta Sarfaty admits she began to self-portray and thereupon distort her own image in the 1970s in order to profane her “pretty face” status.

Subject of countless memes, self-help advice, “killer” catchphrases, etc, confessions from (typically white) people who are seemingly unaware of their social privilege overfeed social media with claims of “life challenging” situations they undergo due to the prejudice that “victimizes” them precisely for their beauty.

Notwithstanding the coincidences there might be concerning race and class privilege shared by Sarfaty and these “tormented as a result of being beautiful” people, what the work of this Greek-born artist – who moved to Brazil as a child – reveals is that it was precisely through art that Gretta, born pretty and *joyful* as predetermined by her name,² proceeded to call not only her own beauty into question, but also the gaze of those who seemed to try and trap her within it.

Sarfaty is part of the Jewish community, within which, as a woman, she’s supposed to observe the unchallenged rite of becoming a wife and mother, devoting her life to family care; which, in Gretta’s case, also included the role of catering to the elite’s *status quo*. Beauty was, as evidenced, an integral element of this social normativity. Prettiness has thus become the focus of Gretta’s criticism to her heritage, and from which she broke away for decades, only now experiencing rapprochements.³

As early as 1975, through *Auto-photos*, *Transformations* and *A woman’s diary* series, the artist’s aggravation loomed in her self-portraits processing, pictorially distorting what she would later seek to deface socially: the oppression of women, of their bodies, their identities and self-determination.

From this period, a small drawing here displayed reveals the artist’s fatigue, as she sketched a self-portrait that utters: “I’m exhausted.” The portrait at issue also hints at her emotional status at that time as well as at the social circle of women like Gretta: “middle and upper class, married white women – housewives bored with leisure, with the home, with children, with buying products, who wanted more out of life,”⁴ as defined by Bell Hooks while determining the standpoints and limitations of white feminism in the 1960s and 70s, which were insufficient to represent, for instance, poor white (or mostly black) women “without men, without children, without homes.”

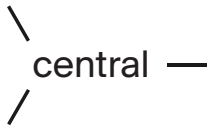
Like other white women of her walk of life, Gretta was kept away from the public arena and from acting as an individual within it. Kept at home or under the watch of her patriarchal family, she’d experience a kind of social invisibility that other women artists – such as her contemporary Tereza Costa Rêgo – have portrayed through *muxarabi* (mashrabiya), a type of Arab-islamic-heritage latticework that is common in colonial Brazilian edifices, especially those built in the

1 Harry Pye asks Gretta Sarfaty Marchant 12 Questions. Interview from booklet *Gretta’s Progress*. Sartorial Art, London, 2008.

2 Gretta’s last name is “Alegre Sarfaty”. “Alegre” is a word for joyful, or happy, in Portuguese.

3 *Reconciliações* (Rapproachments) is also the title of a solo exhibition Gretta Sarfaty held at IAB SP (Instituto de Arquitetos do Brasil) in 2020, curated by Fábio Magalhães.

4 HOOKS, Bell. *Feminist theory from margin to center*. South End Press, Boston, 1984, p. 1-2.



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late 19th Century⁵. As much occluded as it is open, *mashrabiya* plays with light, allowing those who are inside a house, like members of the Brazilian elites, to see whilst not being seen; to see the street whilst not being noticed by it. It's, therefore, a controlling device particularly employed to white women's bodies, kept under a kind of domestic imprisonment regimen despite their undeniable privilege.

Faced with such context, Gretta empathized with women artists' activism and feminism at that time. Although she wasn't part of any feminist groups or organizations, her work delved into subjects and issues cherished by feminism, wherefore researchers such as Talita Trizoli and Mirtes Marins have been analyzing this historical and political lineage.

Aiming to collaborate with such analysis, this exhibition goes beyond the wide array of self-portraits Sarfaty has produced while dealing with the camera lens as a mirror to highlight that, within her work, self-observation has often been accompanied by the conviction of being watched.

Having been a target for intrusive voyeuristic gazing from the patriarchy, Gretta figured that, as she created self-images, her work could also serve as a device to mediate the gaze of others. **NOT YOUR USUAL GRETTA SARFATY** thus explores the very disruption in gaze politics that permeates her poetics.

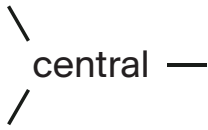
Seeking to broaden this mirrorlike quality idea of the camera, the exhibition invites the viewer to observe how, throughout Gretta's decades of creation, the camera lens gradually turned into an interface for self-awareness and identity reinvention against the oppression of women, as well as into an alterity device.

The act of looking at herself and creating her own image has been, for Sarfaty, not only a way of seeing or showing herself, but also a defense strategy in the face of the Other's gaze. Through drawings that dispense with faciality, photographs such as the ones from the series *Lembranças metamórficas* (1979) or through paintings like *Lembranças evocativas* (1981), we witness Sarfaty turning her back on the gazes that fall upon her, or even going as far as erasing her face from the picture as not to let us meet her eye.

So, much beyond her mirroring ability, the works gathered in **NOT YOUR USUAL GRETTA SARFATY** display the camera lens as a buffer, combined to veils, lace, vapors, graphics, hatching: material and symbolic strategies to blur and confound the Other's gaze while camouflaging the body into the setting (*Spresiano Shower in the Thai-Si*, 2020), the figure into the background (*Metamorphosis*, 1973-1979), the woman into the animal (*Evocative Recollections*, 1978).

At the turn of the 1980s, when veils became increasingly present in Gretta's work – such as in

5 "The voyager artists who had been to Brazil had noted, especially in Bahia and Rio de Janeiro, the *mashrabiya* window architectural system. (...) Women would stand behind these windows and, through them, they'd communicate with the outside world (...). *Mashrabiya* was thus a male dominance device, a symbol of the social locus of middle and upper class women. For many women, devoting their lives to art as a means of expression was a way of overcoming and breaking away from the culture of *mashrabiya*, releasing their gaze and taking imagery beyond the domestic arena to which they were confined. They thus fulfilled their desire to make their worldviews visible." Paulo Herkenhoff in the curatorial essay for the exhibition "Invenções da mulher moderna, para além de Anita e Tarsila" (Modern Women and their Inventions – beyond Anita and Tarsila) held at Instituto Tomie Ohtake, in 2017.



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Evocative Recollections, a performance held on a bed surrounded by a kind of lace mosquito net – their profusion complexified the imagery of seduction or fetishism of the female body as covered in lingerie or in veil and wreath.

Further on, the exhibition displays pieces in which the artist effectively turns the camera the other way, inverting the perspective on the male gaze that historically attack, fetishise and violate women. While doing so, she operates a voyeuristic retaliation: the inversion of power and agency between gazing and being gazed upon, subject and object, men and women, manifest in drawings, portraits and projects such as *My single life in New York* (1987) and *Through a glass darkly* (2010). In both these works, Gretta is the one to watch men, displaying them as objects, just like women have traditionally been.

Transfiguring Marcel Duchamp's *Étant donnés* (1946-66) her own way in *Through a glass darkly*, the artist pictures her then husband, naked, at work – making his occupation her artwork. In *My Single Life...*, Sarfaty publishes a couple of ads in New York newspapers seeking men who could, by any chance, be of affective or sexual interest to her.

Initiating her statements with “NOT YOUR USUAL ADVERTISER”, the artist not only describes the qualities of her so-called *pretty face* to attract suitors, but she also hints, in the ad, at the attributes that ironically reverted, in demand for male bodies, the aesthetic normativity generally applied to women. The ads were followed by a few dates duly filmed by the artist, redirecting the voyeurism that fell upon her. Within that cis realm, it's a provocative critique of female subjection, based not only on denouncing the oppression, but mainly on the creation of agency strategies that view art as an arena, a device, a method.

NOT YOUR USUAL GRETTA SARFATY thus highlights gender and class constituencies implied in the artist's work and in the gaze politics that permeate them. While displaying portraits of her ex-husbands as drawings and videos in which they're naked, posing as “*majos desnudos*”⁶, Gretta makes up a central gesture within her political and poetic path: she transfigures a feminism which, in her early work, seemed to be self-referential, creating space for a critical approach of masculinities.

Instead of exposing herself *ad nauseam* in narcissistic dimension movements, she understands it's necessary to go beyond the *pretty face* and its related aesthetic normativities. When showing tensions between husband and wife – such as the ones pictured in her early 1970s drawings, in which, for instance, a woman carries a man in her arms –, Gretta Sarfaty develops her critique to the male chauvinistic whiteness of financial elites.

While she's aware of occupying the privileged standpoints of white feminism (not without oppression), Gretta joins, through her poetics, the struggle of women for emancipation, autonomy and for the right of existing beyond domestic private arenas – densely populated by gazes as intimate as they're imprisoning.

// Clarissa Diniz, 2023

⁶ La Maja Desnuda (1800), Goya's work, is a central reference in the poetics of Gretta Sarfaty, who in 1985 performed a scene around the iconic painting, titled Goya Time.