

Christabel MacGreevy & Rafaela de Ascanio

Sexing the Cherry

23RD MAR - 28TH APRIL 2023



Tristan Hoare
6 FITZROY SQUARE
LONDON W1T 5DX

Exhibition Response by Dr. Rebecca Birrell

Of what is a woman made? How might the expansive, slippery mechanisms of the self, the flickering of desire and flashes of emotion, be expressed through the rigid, durable stuff of ceramics? In a misogynistic society, what can we learn from revisiting traditions in which women's grace was longed for, their magic coveted?

Taking inspiration from Jeanette Winterson's 1989 novel, *Sexing the Cherry*, where the Twelve Princesses from the Brothers Grimm fairy-tale are tracked down after their reluctant marriages, their murderous revenge on their husbands is recounted, up-ending the original fable's heteronormative happy-ever-after, Christabel MacGreevy and Rafaela de Ascanio's joint show *Sexing the Cherry* provides a chorus of voices in response to these questions, interweaving figures from ancient cultures to pop culture, myth, literature, music and film into a multi-disciplinary body of work richly inflected with feminist and queer thought.

Women gaze out of vessels that possess the resonance of sacred totems. Some resemble deities tasked with our protection, others simmer with a violent avenging intent. Bloody knives are brandished; hearts are eaten; heads lopped off. Others still are driven by pleasure, in the simplicity of a sandwich or in the blissful transcendence offered by dance. None aspire to prettiness, yet they inspire devotion. At their most seductive, they are instruments of goddess worship rather than erotic objects to be consumed by men. Don't be fooled by their floral dresses, bikinis, flaxen hair and lipstick: femininity is an armour, a camouflage, rather than a concession to dreary societal norms. They are unplaceable in time, as though adventuring from one era to the next in the most inconspicuous costume available, a form least likely to draw notice because considered unimportant: an ordinary woman's body.

Imagine an archaeological site in which the city under excavation had for centuries been ruled over by women. Each layer of soil reveals traces of a civilisation in which their voices resounded loudest, their thoughts and emotions became celebrated cultural artefacts, their forms of knowledge and modes of self-expression were circulated as fact and preserved as history. This is a fantasy: women emerge as fragmentary presences in antiquities and the historical archive if they do so at all. Yet these ceramic vessels, medallions and tapestries, with their allusions to mysticism, herbal medicine, votive figures, newly dynamic feminine archetypes, and traditionally female-led practices, evoke a world in which such a society were possible. For generations, women's attempts to access power have been met with obstruction and oppression. Yet there were always those willing to risk it all in acts of defiance. These instances in which women seized back control - real and imagined - unite MacGreevy and de Ascanio's work. MacGreevy adorns medallions with botanical drawings that cite and subvert their medieval source texts, and which celebrate the denigrated systems of thought developed by women healers. For de Ascanio, sphinxes, serpents and sacred bulls, animals and hybrids which share a contested relationship to privilege, become women's natural companions, their co-conspirators in ritualistic performance and sensual indulgence.

In her novel, Winterson lengthens and enriches the young brides' lives, a response to the narrowness of women's horizons across time, a reality reinforced by their representations in culture. She was not the first to attempt this act of hope, and of care. Virginia Woolf's 1928 novel *Orlando* imagines its protagonist defying death and binary gender for over 300 years in a life of hedonistic excess and celebrity as both a man and a woman. Nor was Winterson the last. De Ascanio and MacGreevy's inventive, compassionate works take up this responsibility, pulling women from the wreck over centuries of frustrated ambition and foreshortened existence, and dream up for them another future.

Dr Rebecca Birrell is a Curator in the Department of Paintings, Drawings and Prints at the Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge.

Dr Birrell has occupied curatorial positions at the Jewish Museum London, The Department of Prints and Drawing at The British Museum and at The Charleston Trust. In 2018 she undertook a fellowship at the Yale Center for British Art. While finishing her PhD at the Edinburgh College of Art, she worked on the photographic archive at The Wilhelmina Barns-Graham Trust.

The Gallery

TRISTAN HOARE

6 Fitzroy Square, London, W1T 5DX
Tuesday - Saturday, 11am - 6pm

Founded in 2009, TRISTAN HOARE is a multi-layered gallery focusing on young and established artists working in a variety of mediums. African photography, glass, painting and drawing are all areas of interest, as well as a developing passion for ceramics.

Each year we curate an ambitious exhibition with an overarching theme. *Geometrica* (2018), *Botanica* (2019), *Folds* (2021) and *The Conference of the Birds* (2022) enabled us to collaborate with multiple artists and galleries, combining work from BC to the present day. Exhibitions are executed with the intention of telling a story and connecting with both seasoned collectors and people less familiar with the art world.

The gallery is located in a Grade I listed Georgian townhouse in Fitzroy Square.

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