

The History and Conception of the *Masculin / Féminin* Series

By Ian Wallace

The *Masculin / Féminin* series is a general title that I give to a variety of works that explore themes of conflict and difference between male and female. Although I first used this title (taken from a 1966 Jean-Luc Godard film) in 1996, the theme of gender conflict has appeared in my work since the early 1970s.

My approach to this theme comes in two distinct periods characterized by different artistic problems. In the earlier period extending through the 1970s, I employed "photoconceptualism" as a means of breaking away from my earlier engagement with modernist, abstract monochrome painting. I saw the potential of photography as a way to reintroduce subject matter into the discourse of contemporary art, without turning back to traditional forms of representational painting. In the process of creating a number of panoramic narrative sequences that featured people in performance situations, I was attracted to the discourse of feminism that had recently become a central point of discussion in critical studies. Relevant works of this period include *The Summer Script* (1973-1974), *An Attack on Literature* (1975), *The Constructor* (1976) and *L'Après-Midi* (1977). These large-scale photographic works were designed as narrative or event structures, influenced by cinema, performance art and poetry, as well as the intellectual discourse that accompanied conceptual art. They defined a "postmodern" shift in focus from the "structural" biases evident in my work in the 1960s, to the more "semiotic" representations of the 1970s. Both directly and indirectly, the theme of gender conflict invested the imagery of this earlier work with a conflicted subjectivity.

In the second period, since the 1980s, my work has been predominantly characterized by contrasting and combining photographic imagery with abstract painting so that the transparent communication of subject matter in the photography is opposed by the material opacity of the painted canvas. I am eager to bring back aspects of a modernist aesthetic into my work, but in relation to the photoconceptual practice of my earlier work. In these later works, I laminated photographic enlargements onto a painted field, thus blending the discourses of photography, with its ability to introduce subject matter and references to narrative themes, with the discourse of abstract painting and its relation to the history of modernity and critique of representation. I thought of the photographic image as a "figure" inscribed across the "field" of canvas. For the pictures in this period, I focused primarily on themes related to "locations": the studio, museum and the street.

After attempting to develop a script for a video project based on an early short story by Marcel Proust, I turned my attention again to the theme of gender conflict. The theme introduced a rich pictorial element and subject matter that stood in contrast to the purely formal composition of colour on canvas, yet complemented the dialectical nature of the work as a whole by accenting the theme of opposition. Some early examples of this trajectory include a series of large works titled *At the Crosswalk*, in which a man and a woman are photographed facing each other on opposing street corners. An early example, *Heavenly Embrace* (1987), features contemporary male and female figures separated by panels of Greek classical sculpture representing *The Rape of Persephone*. Works such as this evoke an allegorical approach to the subject that is distinctly literary and symbolist.

Later, in the mid 1990s, I returned to this theme but avoided the literary and allegorical approaches of the earlier works. I wanted the symbolic meaning of the paintings to emerge more from a direct "operative" handling of the imagery as material. I began appropriating images from magazine

advertisements and film-history books and cutting them into two, so that the male and female figures were divided from each other and separated into a diptych structure. This act of division was a performative, symbolic separation of the sexes, suggested by the concepts of "cleavage," "coupure" or "cutting" in the writings of Julia Kristeva. It also reinforced my interest in returning to a material, process-oriented way of referring to received, recognizable images that were already recognized in the field of critical culture. But the obvious severing of the image into two parts, by virtue of an aesthetic "operation" on the image, offered an allegorical sign of critical deconstruction. These disconnected elements were recomposed into the framework of the canvas quadrant as a poetics of fragmentation.

In more recent variations of the divided image, I have composed two or more images showing slight shifts in the position of the figures that imply a narrative development within the pictorial frame. These works, dating back to 2007, are titled *Event Structure*. The complex montage of dramatic elements in these works are accompanied by a more intricate arrangement of abstract painted segments that evoke an almost "cubist" compositional dynamic. These works are in fact "collages" that gather within the pictorial field of the canvas a variety of references and techniques.

In the history of modern art, "collage" is an important compositional and deconstructive device. For me, collage is the intentional construction of the fragment—an alien element that erupts within the unity of a representation. In many of the *Masculin / Féminin* studies on paper that explore these concepts, I purposefully assumed a rough, unfinished style that provides an expressive effect of dissent underlying these works. In 1996, while preparing a series of finished canvasses on this theme for an exhibition, I borrowed the title and appropriated the images of *Masculin / Féminin* from the Godard film.

I was specifically attracted to the graphic symbol of the slash or solidus that separates the words Masculin and Féminin, and acts as an analogy to my symbolic, dialectical approach to the subject. I was attracted to the idea that the slash, which signifies a formal separation of the signifiers in the title, could be parallel to the formal symbolism of my act of "cleavage" in the breaking into two parts of these appropriated pictures.

The dialectics in this series function on two levels: in the spatial difference between male and female in the imagery, and in the divide between the referential photography and non-referential abstract or monochromatic painting. This parallel structure leads to further considerations: is the theme of gender conflict as purely formal as the difference between photography and painting? Is the structure of conflict necessary to activate the relations between the elements? I see this recurring aspect of my work as a contradiction in suspension. It is a philosophical problem played out aesthetically within the framework of a work of art, the pictorial and painting. Has the essentially subjective dimension of gender conflict or social relations been sublimated or shifted under the terms of a formalist operation? Even if this is so and it distorts the content of the theme, it is the primary function of a work of art to act as a cipher, to give form to its concept, not necessarily as a transparent and final exegesis, but as the outline of its cogency.

Masculin/ Féminin Exhibitions

- 1997 Leonard & Bina Ellen Gallery, Montréal
- 1997 S.L. Simpson Gallery, Toronto
- 1999 Galerie Meert Rihoux, Brussels
- 2007 Yvon Lambert, New York

2010 MacKenzie Art Gallery, Regina
2012 Catriona Jeffries Gallery, Vancouver

Bibliography

Cindy Richmond, "Camera Caesura," *Ian Wallace: Masculin / Féminin*, Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery, Montréal, 1997

Timothy Long, "A Place of Active Judgement: Parametric Strategies in the Work of Jean-Luc Godard and Ian Wallace," *Ian Wallace: Masculin / Féminin*, MacKenzie Art Gallery, Regina, 2010