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Volume 2, Number 19 | The Weekly Newspaper of Chelsea | February 8 - 14, 2008

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Chelsea Now photos by Jefferson Siegel

Multimedia artist and new Chelsea resident Colette sits inside her 24th St. apartment next to a portrait of her alter ego, the Countess Reichenbach.

Incomparable Colette living art in Chelsea

By Jason Grant

“I’m a downtown girl who’s moved uptown,” said Colette, the multimedia artist, as she flashed the provocatively coy smile that helped make her a darling of the international set. “Uptown—to Chelsea.” She turned her head and pointed out the window of her apartment, on 24th St. between Ninth and Tenth Aves. “I can’t walk down the street without being invited to a party. Who would’ve guessed it would be so much fun? And, I’m steps away from some of the best galleries in town!”

For those who may have missed the stories in the New York Post and Art Journal magazine—as well as in the Chelsea Now’s sister paper, Downtown Express—Colette was recently forced out the Financial District space she inhabited for three decades. The 177-year-old, red-brick building at 213 Pearl Street, which for 30 years she transformed into an ever-changing artwork, was demolished late last year to make way for a new hotel. The late-



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ever-changing artwork, was demolished late last year to make way for a new hotel. The late Brendan Gill of the New Yorker tried to have the space protected, as well as famed art dealer Leo Castelli, but to no avail.

“Since it’s a new year and a new beginning, I decided to conduct a study in black and white by eliminating color from my wardrobe and art from my home,” Colette said of her fresh start in Chelsea. “The Gabriel Byrne portrait and other works were draped. I was a witness.”

As if to share a confidence, she leaned forward and said, “I planned to continue for another two weeks, but I couldn’t take it anymore! It was driving me crazy. I missed the color. I missed the art. I proved my point, and since I am not into self-torture, it made no sense to continue.” Off came the drapes covering the art, and out came the colorful wardrobe—all part of her rebirth in Chelsea.

Color is so well integrated into her life and work that Leslie Cahmi called attention to it in her article “Fit for Living” last May in the New York Times. Although the feature focused on Louise Nevelson, Cahmi wrote that Colette, during her “La Vie en Rose” series in 2004, “religiously wore pink for several months.” Colette nodded her head and smiled. “Including pink hair,” she added.

“Colette’s move to Chelsea is a positive one,” noted Alessandra Spivy-Anderson, past president of the Art Critics Association. “It brings her close to the current art scene. She will do a lot to make it more lively and interesting.” Spivy-Anderson paused, thought for a moment, then said, “Colette is a first-rate artist. I hope one of the dealers in Chelsea will have the foresight to give her an exhibition.”



Colette stands among works depicting some of her adopted personas throughout the past 30 years.

She has a fast-approaching exhibition slated for the Wolfsburg Museum in Wolfsburg, Germany, where she has been asked to reconstruct her legendary, living environment.

While Colette fought through most of 2007 to keep her downtown atelier, she still had two major exhibitions in New York. She showcased “Intriguing Portraits” at the Vivian Horan Gallery, and followed with “The ApARTment,” an elaborate installation, at the HPGRP Gallery in the Meatpacking District.

Ms. Horan, whose gallery is an important stop on the East Side art circuit, sees Colette’s

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impact on the contemporary art scene. “Her work demonstrates the groundbreaking role she played in creating the constructed photograph, utilizing alternative space for installations, incorporating fashion into plastic arts and sharing her unique vision with her viewer,” Horan said.

In describing Colette’s portraits, art writer Elizabeth Rogers wrote for 2002 Montreal Biennale, “Her unique, commissioned portraits reveal the spirit and character of her subjects on a level rarely seen or undertaken in contemporary work.” Rogers continued, “Wildly and quixotically original, her portraits transform, through paint, glitter, objects and collage, the photographic image of the designated subject into an individualized yet ideal dream figure. These haunting depictions, reminiscent in their painterly sense of celebrated 18th century European masters, honor the individual’s idiosyncrasies and chosen appurtenances.”

Documentary filmmaker Paul Tchinkell has created a series of celebrated film-portraits, using subjects like Robert Mapplethorpe, Louise Bourgeois, Jeff Koons and Cindy Sherman. Referring to his film on Colette, he said, “She has been a visionary presence on the New York art scene since the early 1970s. Her work is complex and encompasses many concepts that stretch our notion of art. She explores the role the artist plays in our life, the female persona in art, and the line between fine and commercial art and fashion. Many of her ideas are echoed today in the art world as well as throughout popular culture.”

Alanna Heiss, executive director of the PS 1 Contemporary Art Center, a MoMA affiliate, wrote while traveling in Asia, “Colette is a deeply original artist who emerged during the great ’70s installation movement and has remained true to her vision—as that vision is also how she identifies herself.”

Colette has taken on different personas since the start of her career, often changing with her surroundings. “I created them to put distance between me and the viewer, and thus establish more objectivity,” she said.

She staged her own death in 1978 as part of a performance at the downtown Whitney Museum, called “The Last Stitch,” where she remade herself as “Justine,” an entrepreneur focused on marketing Colette’s vision and image.

Justine, part of a conceptual series intended to blur the line between art and life, posed as a fashion designer, decorator, singer and inventor. She wrote a theme song, “Ripping Myself Off,” and recorded the LP “Beautiful Dreamer.” As Justine, she also created a line of one-of-a-kind clothing that was sold through fashion label Fiorucci, as well as a series of products inspired by her own image, including a Colette doll and perfume.

Colette was then invited to Berlin in 1984, where she reemerged as “Mata Hari and the Stolen Potatoes.” When she later began her “Bavarian Adventure” series (1986-91), art lovers met her newest alter ego, the divine “Countess Reichenbach.”

She returned to New York in the early ’90s, and, inspired by the 18th century, debuted her “House of Olympia.” During this period, her art featured the Colette mannequin sculpture, displayed prominently at the Fashion/Art show at the Guggenheim Museum.

Jeff Koons is a highly regarded conceptual artist and leading figure in the neo-pop movement, who was elected a Fellow to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 2005. Koons, who also earned the distinction of receiving the highest amount paid at auction for the work of a living artist, reserved high praise for Colette. When asked, he thought for a moment. “She is an artist I’ve known for many years,” Koons said. “When I first came to New York, I followed closely her performances and installations. She

represents the best aspects of the New York avant-garde.”

Whether avant-garde, complete fantasy or new public identity, Colette’s personas were always complete. “Each incarnation has a philosophy and a uniform,” she explained. “For example, two of the rules for the House of Olympia were: one, bringing back chivalry and manners; and two, art that matches the furniture.”

Lumiere, her post-9/11 identity, believes that as individuals we need to become lighter and simpler. As a result, her compositions are minimalist and the colors more subdued.

As she walked to the front door of her apartment, Colette added, “You know it’s a good thing I moved from the Pearl Street living environment. It was continuous, always changing. Now, I’m freer to place my art in more public spaces, continue creating commissioned portraits and create more installations.”

Whatever Colette’s next incarnation, the community will finally be able to claim her as Chelsea’s own.

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Chelsea Now is published by
Community Media LLC.
145 Sixth Avenue, New York, NY 10013
Phone: (212) 229-1890 Fax: (212) 229-2790
Advertising: (646) 452-2465 •
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