

The Streets Are Her Canvases - An Interview with the artist Colette

By Robert A. Schaefer, Jr. | Education/Inspiration | Nov 2, 2009

Last year my friend Elizabeth Rogers, who writes about art and curates exhibitions in both New York and New Delhi, introduced me to the multi-media artist. Colette. Back in August I had the opportunity to visit her studio at the Marie Walsh Sharpe Art Foundation (DUMBO, Brooklyn, NY) to see her new work and find out more about her.

Robert Schaefer: How would you define artist?



Colette with new paintings

Colette: The world is full of artists, dealers collectors etc, but few earn that title in the higher sense. For me, a true artist is one with a unique vision, a person who looks at the world with different eyes and is able to transmit that vision successfully like a medium.

RS: Tell me about yourself. Were you interested in art as a child?

C: I was born in Tunis, Tunisia, grew up in Nice, France and later moved to the United States. I think I thought of myself as an artist from the time I was born - and not just because of my drawing. As long as I can remember I was creating a world of my own wherever we moved. It was so personal that I was reluctant to share it with anyone. It included dressing up, stage design - and naturally using myself as the main person in the work.

RS: Your career continued even when you were vacated from you legendary studio in New York City. How were you able to make lemonade out of such a lemon?

C: What most people find remarkable is that I survived this tragedy and found a way to once again resurrect and reinvent myself. My art is all about alchemy, transformation and exploring the boundaries between art and life. So, my personal tragedy became inspiration and material for a new body of work. I chose to see it as an opportunity for "new beginnings."

RS: Much of your art deals with having selected a synonym for yourself. Can you elaborate on that and why certain names were selected for particular times and locations?

C: By 1973 I was exhibiting at the Stefanotty Gallery in New York City with other well-known, older artists. This led to more exposure in New York such as the historical Clocktower Installation in 1975 and more European exposure such as my representation in the Paris Biennale in 1977. The critics described my work as "les fous qui vont devenir les classiques!" (mad work that will in the future be labeled classic) In an elaborate octagonal room I created made of salmon colored satin and embedded lighting, I posed reclining as Marie Antoinette the Austrian-born French queen...the rest is history!

I was born with the name Colette but started using personas as part of my art in 1978. I staged my death and resurrected as Justine whose mission was to market Colette's unique vision, which had been widely imitated by the commercial world. Justine's successor was Mata Hari 1984 -86 in Berlin, the Countess Reichenbach in Munich 1986-92, the House of Olympia 1992-2001. My return to New York as my permanent home brought about Maison Lumiere, which was born after 9/11. Each persona was created as a muse and had a new philosophy, aesthetics, personal look, and a particular mission, which was connected to my location and to what I felt was important to convey at the time.



Colette with her conceptual paintings

RS: Although you are French born, your major work and exhibitions have taken place in New York City and Berlin. What brought you to New York and later to Berlin, and why not Paris or some other French city?

C: It would seem likely that my work would do well in Paris - at the time of the Biennale my work was being exhibited in an established gallery Gillespie- Delaage that also exhibited other women artists like Anette Messager and Laurie Anderson, but it was Germany that gave me real support.

RS: Why do you feel the need for public action in your art?

C: My interest in street works, and other public outlets to create works has to do with the desire to reach larger and varied audiences. In the late Seventies, conceptual art reigned. Although it interested me and had some influence on my work, I felt it only reached a limited public.

RS: Can you name any artists who have inspired your work?



Colette with her new film

C: There are many artists who have been inspirational for my work - Warhol, Joseph Bueys, Graham, Joseph Cornell, Della Franesca, O'edon, and others like Yvonne Rainer and Grand Union with whom I danced for a short time and Robert Rauschenberg, and Bob Wilson who were involved with multi media and theater as well as art. I was drawn to those artists who were visionaries and less public as well as those who were public personalities...and worked with multi media and collaborated with musicians, dancers, actors, and film directors. My art installations and performances found a home in the downtown nightlife in Manhattan for a significant time in the late Seventies and early Eighties as well as shop windows such as the infamous Fiorucci Window in 1978 with my Victorian punk look (The name of my band was Justine and the Victorian Punks) when I "Staged My Own Death" - and resurrected as Justine who posed as a recording star, fashion designer, head of my estate and creator of products inspired by "Colette's Look." (a look which is often said to have influenced Madonna in her early "downtown days" (Alan Jones Arts Magazine 1991).

RS: What role has photography played in your work? Do you see it as more than just documentation?

C: I consider myself to be an artist that uses photography more than a photographer- I have frequently been referred to as a pioneer in "the staged photograph." Many of my early photo works were obscured by my reputation as an installation- artist, but thank goodness this is rapidly changing.

RS: Between December 2008 and February 2009 you were featured in "React Feminism" at the Akademie der Künste (Academy of Art) in Berlin. You were physically part of an installation in which you reclined nude with the notorious actress Tabea Blumenstein - then lover and muse of filmmaker Ulrike Ottinger. How did you feel about that? Did people assume that to be your sexual orientation?

C: The installation to which you are referring took place in another time - 1976 in the exhibiton Soho NY but in the same place. I did not give a moment's thought to what people were thinking concerning my sexual orientation. Again this year I was asked to exhibit the pioneering works (indoor installation/performances and street works) from the Seventies until the early 80's in REACT Feminism at the Akademie der Künste (Academy of Fine Arts) in Berlin, Germany and to re-enact a work from that time.

I exhibited as part of my installation - photographs, videos and objects from that time and chose to have a model pose as me "the beautiful dreamer" in the performance. I general, I don't believe in re-enactment; performance has to do with the present moment.

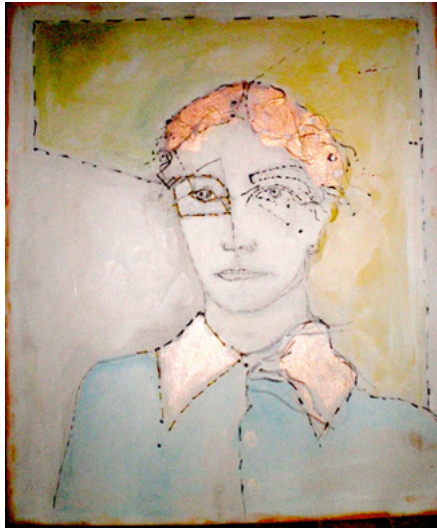
RS: You said in a previous interview that much of the concept of the different personalities you have embodied have come from your dreams. Tell me about your dreams and how they influence you.

C: My dreams are inspirations for my work in general not only the different persona. They are like messengers from the gods.

RS: Many of your presentations have involved scandal - like the one in 1974/75 when you appeared bare-breasted as a rag doll in Victorian boots and corsets in the windows of Rizzoli. Do you rely on that or is scandal just what happens sometimes at these events?



colette holding records about her life cia-colleteinstitute of art



portrait of alexandra-mixedmedia

providing real scandalous services. I actually had to change one of my telephone numbers! But I must say that most of my newest works were created in the privacy and quiet of the studio. I am still interested in being commissioned to do public installations under the right circumstances, and I am doing my best to stay away from scandal.

C: The window of Rizzoli "fashion as fantasy" was first presented in 1974. As a very young artist I was making an art and fashion statement – as a "ragdoll" bare breasted with an old corset on my waist in the windows of Rizzoli's on Fifth Avenue – veils, Victorian boots, etc...I was also rebelling because the space - allocated for a silk/satin environment - had been given to Karl Lagerfeld, so I had only my body and my ingenuity as weapons. although I also remember having a larger light box with a big nude photo of myself - full front, naked, my body covered with small white artificial birds and white birds connected by cords embedded in soft fabrics pierced thus allowing the light to come through from behind- this also made a statement! Scandal seems to have been a recurring theme in my life and art (many of my earlier installations included nudity, although it seemed very natural - and it did make some waves, most of the time unintentionally) I guess "Staging My Own Death" in 1978 and resurrecting as Justine was another one! In Munich; however during my "Bavarian Adventure," it became a theme for a series of works "Dial C for Scandal." It was my response to the Munich Intelligencia... who loved inviting me to their parties, "- that scandalous New York artist..." as a form of entertainment for their amusement. So, although that annoyed me, I made art out of it by creating a service called "Dial C for Scandal." The press took it literally even though I was only interested in making images of me at work, rather than really

RS: Do ever feel that you are perhaps living in the wrong time period? Or is part of your art concept the contrast between the 18th Century, which you so often portray and today's world? If you had indeed lived then, do you think you would have been one of the aristocrats or fighting for the independence of France?

C: it is not so much that I believe I was born at the wrong time...as it is that I was born an alien (just kidding) I feel I have lived at different times, and I use different periods of history - ie the 18th Century - to help me make a statement. Before the 18th century, the Victorian Era was my inspiration for "Justine and the Victorian Punks" I felt that women in many ways were still not liberated, and I also was intrigued by these aesthetics and combined them with punk aesthetics. During my reign as "Olympia" in the 90's - I "Colettesized" the Eighteenth Century in my art, and held many salons. Some of the rules were: art that matches the furniture, bringing back chivalry and good manners, innocence and romance. The House of Olympia also brought back "the commissioned portrait," and the "art patron" - all that I believe was lacking in our contemporary art world and culture. Egyptian and religious art periods have also been an influence although they have yet to have found a "living persona."



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Colette with books on her art-life

Oh, to get back to your question about what role I might have played if I had indeed been living at that time, I must say that I can relate to both aristocrat and revolutionary. I have done installations and performed as Marie Antoinette more than once, and posed as liberty in "Liberty leading the People" (my very first photo performance) and later, I created an elaborate installation in the attic of PS1 with me as Marat for its opening in 1976.

RS: You recently ended a year's studio space at the Marie Walsh Sharpe Art Foundation in DUMBO (Down Under The Manhattan Bridge Overpass), Brooklyn. How did get that? What kind of work resulted from that time and was it dependent on that space?

C: The new studio also offered me a spacious, raw environment - with no history and lots of natural light to which I was not accustomed. How appropriate since I am still "Lumiere," the persona that became my muse after September 11, 2001. An intern had encouraged me to mail the application to the Foundation a minute before the deadline - so when I received it, it was like winning the lottery! There emerged a new body of work, which is included a short film The Last Days of Pearl Street dealing with the history and demolition of my legendary loft (the opus of my work mentioned earlier) I continued to use the name "Lumiere" (French for light) which I began using in September 11, 2001- which is all about getting to the essence of things and making oneself (and one's art) lighter, more mobile and flexible. The street tableaux I had performed during the demolition of my building became the material for photo works and paintings. I also worked on a series of "metaphysical portraits" in which I was capturing the spirit of friends and colleagues – this time going back to a more minimal, lighter style reminiscent of my earliest paintings.

RS: What does the future hold for you and your work?

C: I hope to find great representation, a retrospective exhibition at MOMA in New York City (or other major museum - The Guggenheim would do!) with major publication of my life's work, and a Colette Museum. I want to make more permanent public art installations in important places such as hotel lobbies, etc. At the very least I want to continue creating as many what

art installations in important places such as hotel lobby suites, etc. At the very least I want to continue creating no matter what the circumstances, and last but not least I would like my accomplishments to be more than just an important body of work. I hope to be asked to do more lectures and guest professorships at various art schools. By becoming an influential footprint, I will leave behind some "shoes" for young minds to step into and from which to forge their own path. However, if all does not go according to plan, I always have "the streets for my canvases!"