

Miss Van and the Evolution of the Feminine from Brick onto Canvas

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It was during her formative art school years in the early 1990s that Miss Van (1973-) started her graffiti art practice on the streets of her hometown of Toulouse, France. While following a similar artistic path and career choice as other graffiti and street artists such as Doze Green and Shepard Fairey, she chose to embrace the enclosed spaces of the gallery scene. The evolution of her *poupées* have inevitably demonstrated a clear distinction among her contemporary street artists, as Miss Van relocated her work to an exhibition setting rather than left exclusively as a street practice. Furthermore, the abandonment of the male-dominated graffiti subculture in favour of a more neutral exhibition space is reflective of a visual shift apparent in her *poupées* as they develop from being mere sex objects to being confidently sexualized women. It is therefore apparent that Miss Van and her *poupées* reflect an artist movement tied to urban visual culture and exemplifies how street art is subjected to changes when relocated from the public sphere into an institutional space.

Vanessa Castex, who goes under the penname Miss Van, entered the alternative street art scene at eighteen years old as an art student. She is one of the first women to have penetrated this world in a meaningful way and is now recognized as a pioneer for female street artists. The *poupées* are her best known work that she verbally expresses as visual extensions of herself, her ego and her feelings.¹ Originally, these works illustrated overtly sexualized representations of women with a cartoonish minx-like appeal whilst flirtatiously teasing the

viewer. However, Miss Van's maturation as an artist, along with the spatial transition from the streets into galleries, led to a change in visual representation. Although these poupées are still sexualized women, they differentiated from their predecessors as they are now no longer viewed as being sex objects. It is apparent through her works in the *Lagrimas de Mariposas* collection (2006), that within a gallery setting, these poupées have gained unique personalities and emotional complexity. This change naturally occurred in conjunction with the move into more intimate viewing spaces. As a result, through their feminine portraits, these poupées have become more revealing in expressing Miss Van's complex visual vocabulary.

It is important to establish a clear definition of "street art" prior to examining how Miss Van's work represents femininity, and how a changing context alters how it is conceptually perceived. The technical term for "street art", even if created by a reputed street artist, is invalidated when entering a gallery space. Art only qualifies as "street art" when it is exclusively situated in the city streets and contains the potential to speak to a larger and more varied audience whilst living in the realm of the everyday. This produces an ongoing dialogue between the work, people and spaces. It becomes apparent that the piece's ephemerality is a result of this transitory dialogue, and as such, the raw quality and authenticity of street art is lost when relocated into galleries. In contrast to street art, art exhibited in a gallery setting is directed towards a specific clientèle and aims to generate profit and please a targeted audience. It is within these galleries that these pieces become confined and are experienced differently by viewers. No longer are they required to consider socio-political realities and urban dialogue inhabiting the context in which they typically reside. This is exemplified by the way the juxtaposition of random elements within a cityscape is replaced by the confinement of the gallery, in which the harmonization of artworks, aim to create a premeditated theme. This is especially apparent in the case of a curatorial mandate, as the curator wants to gain credibility from a specific audience. It is thus evident, that the gallery is a confined area manipulated by a curator with a specific theme in mind, whereas the streets are non-controlled spaces that are open to a multitude of ideas from a larger spectrum of self-driven artists.² Some street artists, such as Ron English, who also transitioned into the art gallery setting, created their own alternative sub-genre within street art: work that is often characterised by lowbrow and pop-surrealism. They are both advocated by magazines such as *Juxtapoz* or *Hi-Fructose*, publications that highlight the work created by graffiti and street artists.³

There is a distinct difference between Miss Van's earlier street art and the work she now creates for galleries. The poupées have emerged as a creative extension of the artist herself as they have grown-up and evolved alongside her. They began as visually simplistic with thick graphic outlines filled in with opaque colouring. Over time the artwork's contours were gradually replaced by thinner, more delicately refined line-work as she strengthened the detail and integrated a more varied colour palette in her matured female characters.⁴ Miss Van states that as she matured, she felt a greater need for her pieces to hold more meaning and could no longer produce simple representations of sexy and frivolous under-clothed girls.⁵ Moving into the gallery space was a good choice, not only for her art practice but also for her continual growth as an artist and possibilities of expression. This granted the artist greater accessibility to a variety of mixed media and yielded the ability to express ideas that were not possible within the streets.⁶ This move enabled her to explore new techniques that were subject to more intimate aspects of her personal life, such as her sexual orientation and how she chose to represent herself as a woman, thus permitting her to better establish her status as an artist.⁷ As a result of the shift in media and technique, her work is now more approachable as it engages and enhances the viewer's physical proximity to the work. Miss Van has further emphasized the boundaries between audience and artwork by placing obstacles in front of some of her pieces with the aim of coercing the viewer into engaging with her poupées in a more intimate manner. This technique has already been used in her show *Atame* (2007) at the Magda Danysz Gallery. In this show the artist used hide as her support in some of her pieces, while other works were concealed with scarves that needed to be pushed aside in order to be viewed. Therefore, unlike her earlier works which were decipherable at a distance, these creations can no longer be appreciated from afar. Although at this point in her career she still creates street art, Miss Van has made it quite clear that a return to create art within a public space is less than desirable; it would be like turning back time, even if that time that practice still holds nostalgia for the artist.⁸

Miss Van's recent works are visually ambiguous and unstable, whilst exposing a raw and more expressive style than her early stylized poupées. No matter how innocent these poupées may seem at first glance, they are nonetheless borderline erotic, albeit never explicitly vulgar. It is a prominent concern of the artist that her work never falls into that margin, as she has no intention of being derogatory towards her own gender.⁹ Furthermore, she believes that each of

her poupées, though sharing the same generic name, still reflect distinctive personalities and use their charms in provocative ways to either entice or repel the viewer.¹⁰ Yet despite Miss Van's play on attraction and repulsion, something remains disturbing about these dolls. They appear unsettling, dark and surreal, as they lure the viewer into their creepy narrative world. According to the artist, it was the *Lagrimas de Mariposas* show (2006) at the Magda Danysz Gallery in Paris that this pivotal visual and emotional change first manifested, differentiating from what Miss Van once created in the streets. Displaying a visible shift, this show demonstrated the integration of new emotional content within her poupées: that being a theme based on fragility and sadness.¹⁰ Most of this particular exhibition portrayed her poupées through a series of portraits expressing their different visual traumas. Although the reasoning behind their sadness is unknown, the aftermath from these traumas is discernible through their facial expressions.

The piece titled *Poupée* (2006), created for the *Lagrimas de Mariposas* show, is described as being a prime example of how Miss Van has visually drifted from her iconic street art into what she is known and recognized for. In this work, the girl represented is neither a child nor fully woman. Suggestive of a pubescent teenager, perhaps she is a visual manifestation of how Miss Van felt at a liminal moment in her life located in between the two. There is something puerile and naïve about this representation, as if the poupée is trying to grow up faster than her body allows her to. Her face is evocative of innocence and youth, whereas her heavily applied make-up and exposed perky breasts are suggestive of an older persona. We could also state that she is reminiscent of a French Parisian Pierrot – the unhappy clown wearing a ruffled collar with heavily applied make-up. As Pierrots are known as a sad type of clown associated to French culture, Miss Van's affiliation to such a culture is evident, as she herself is French. This painting is an example of how Miss Van visually references the Pierrot through her art as a means of portraying her own sadness. Her chosen titles of such works, poupées, are further indicative of this relationship. Miss Van uses visual cues to materialize this emotion. For example, in this piece, a small section of her hair is tightly tied back at her forehead whilst revealing a low hairline that falls lightly and loosely in a semi-transparent wave framing her face. Her heavily plastered make-up evokes an impression that if washed off, it could potentially reveal the true nature and feelings of this young demoiselle in distress. Just as in Miss Van's poupées painted in the streets, this poupée still has a downturned pout and a bunny nose, however her eyes are no longer

sly and daunting like the artist's street representations. These eyes now look upward in a manner that lifts her eyebrows away from her almond shaped eyes, as her painted eyelashes weigh downward revealing a tear drop that soils her heavily blushed rosy cheeks.

As Miss Van chose to create this piece with acrylics, its watered-down application resembles a watercolour painting. The artist's amalgamation of drawn elements with painterly qualities were executed by applying thin and light acrylic washes over a base sketch, thus exposing itself from behind the paint. This reveals the bust of the poupée and causes her face to fully resemble a painting. If Miss Van had not integrated drawing into this painting, the viewer would not be able to differentiate the poupée's body from the background due to their similarity in light colouration. The poupée is left illuminated amidst an empty background of offset greys and light green hues. It is evident that she is the primary subject as she physically occupies most of the canvas. Her central role is further emphasized by the placement of this piece within an institutional space – a setting that exhibits artwork against white walls. As a result, both the subject and work of art are left inescapable from the viewer.

Miss Van articulated that “it is nice to develop my art in a feminine way [...] because to me that is strong. I think I have a strong personality from being surrounded by men all the time in graffiti.”¹² However, when focusing on Miss Van's female depictions, nothing but the contrary can be stated by comparing her recent gallery pieces with her earlier representations of the poupées from the streets. Both contemporary and past works equally fall into the margin of being considered derogatory representations of the female sex. Historically speaking, as it was men that started graffiti art, they consequently defined its visual vocabulary. This pictorial lexicon is further defined through cartoons that accompany their pieces. Male graffiti artists have often portrayed women in an overtly sexualized way, creating illustrative representations that depict women as sexual objects. The desire of female graffiti artists to be accepted into this male-dominated subculture has consequently resulted in their abandonment of their femininity in favour of the visual conventions previously established by men. Unfortunately numerous female graffiti artists have lowered their creativity and represented their own gender with derogatory undertones as a way of negotiating their acceptance into this subculture. It is therefore evident that Miss Van, while acutely aware of this situation, visually challenges the unbalanced nature of gender inequality. “While her paintings generally give off

an innocent-like quality, Miss Van's works actually mirror a society that has grown used to conveying provocative" images of the female body; it is a hegemonic practice deemed normal and unquestionable.¹³ Furthermore, the artist represents her own generation by mixing "doses of display and innerness, inviting everyone to reflect on contemporary questions pertaining to how our current society endows derogatory images."¹⁴

Miss Van does not shy away from these subcultural problems, which are further reflective of universal gender dynamics. She raises issues that have historically been avoided whilst presenting them to the spectator at face value. However, over the course of many years, Miss Van has received negative press from numerous feminists for the alleged debasement of women through her portrayals. Her female depictions in the streets of Toulouse and Barcelona, where she now resides, fall into the margins of female objectification. When the artist found her artistic voice as a young emerging artist, she probably felt the implicit social restrictions of being a woman engaging in self-representation as a woman, within a male-dominated environment. Historically speaking, as graffiti culture was started by a predominantly male collective, they were the ones who inevitably defined the conventional styles of their group. Since graffiti is founded on an expression of masculinity, women are still not easily accepted for what they create on the streets.¹⁵ As the loss of identity is a common fear, women are often regarded as intimidating. As consequence women are therefore "placed into a position that has been enforced upon [them] by boys who are trying to protect their masculine credibility."¹⁶ Whilst pushed to the peripheral sidelines, it is the female street artists like Miss Van that have continued to penetrate this gender separation.

The re-localization of graffiti art, from the streets into commercial galleries, consequently changes the connotations, meaning and affiliations of the work. The gallery is thus perceived as offering a more democratic and egalitarian setting. Although this space grants greater leniency to how women choose to portray themselves, neither the graffiti subculture nor the gallery scene are strangers to this gender division and subversion.

Some feminists argue that Miss Van has gained credibility by creating works that 'sell' women's sexuality in exchange for fame. The aversion felt towards Miss Van's work is largely rooted in the feminist claim that the personal is the political. They understand that the "articulation of subjectivity in one person's

experience [is] shared,” as it holds the potential to speak to many types of people.¹⁷ It is due to this perspective, that they’ve deemed her female representations as disrespectful, feeling that it was her duty, as a female artist within a male-dominated street art subculture, to illustrate women in a non-objectifying way. However, what they failed to realize is that Miss Van’s poupées were not created to speak on behalf of all women as her works inhabit the personal sphere rather than the political.

The singer Pink once stated that it is women that try to negotiate “all [the] signs of femininity (incapability), with [the] signs of masculinity (capability).”¹⁸ In other words, women have neglected to fully express themselves by adhering to male standards of masculinity, identity and credibility. Miss Van however, refuses to do so through the visual manifestation of her femininity. However despite these constraints, Miss Van has still has gained credibility from her male peers, in proving her dedication to this form of artistic practice.

In short, Miss Van has chosen to rebel against male supremacy by exhibiting her femininity in a raw and unabridged manner. Furthermore, she is a prime example of how the meaning of street art changes when relocated into a gallery setting. Over the course of her eighteen-year career she has made a distinct shift from representing overtly sexualized poupées on public walls to mature female representations viewed within galleries. In addition, she is also an interesting artist to analyze in terms of how she decides to portray women in each of these locations. Over the years to come, it will be intriguing to witness how Miss Van further develops her portrayal of women within these institutional spaces as she continues to expand on her fantasies.

Endnotes

1. Lainya Magana, “Miss Van.” *Juxtapoz: Art and Culture Magazine*, 90 (July 2008): 68.
2. Tristan Manco, *Street Logos*, (Hong Kong: Thames and Hudson, 2004) 9.
3. Lainya Magana, “Miss Van.” *Juxtapoz: Art and Culture Magazine*, 90 (July 2008):79.
4. Magda Danysz, *From Style Writing to Art: A Street Art Anthology* (Italy: Drago, 2011) 263.
5. Lainya Magana, “Miss Van.” *Juxtapoz: Art and Culture Magazine* 90 (July 2008): 68.
6. Ibid., 74.

7. Ibid., 74.
8. Lainya Magana, “Miss Van.” *Juxtapoz: Art and Culture Magazine* 90 (July 2008):74.
9. “Miss Van”, Magda Danysz Gallery, <http://www.magda-gallery.com/en/node/121> (accessed Aug. 8, 2011)
10. Magda Danysz, *From Style Writing to Art: a Street Art Anthology* (Italy: Drago, 2011) 264.
11. Lainya Magana, “Miss Van.” *Juxtapoz: Art and Culture Magazine*. 90 (July 2008):74.
12. Ibid.,79.
13. Magda Danysz, *From Style Writing to Art: a Street Art Anthology* (Italy: Drago, 2011) 63.
14. Nancy Macdonald, “Constructive Deconstruction: Graffiti as a Tool for Making Masculinity” in *The Graffiti Subculture: Youth, Masculinity, and Identity in London and New York* (New York : Palgrave Macmillan, 2002) 101.
15. Ibid., 131.
16. Ibid., 101.
17. Katy Deepwell, “Feminist Models: Now and the Future” in *It’s Time For Action (There’s No Option) About Feminism* (Zurich: Migros Museum Publishing, 2007) 205.
18. Ibid., 131.
19. Ibid., 132.