

Pop Go Your Clogs — Nigel Cooke

At the close of last year, the boys' club of Pop art history was significantly shaken up by two major exhibitions – *Seductive Subversion: Women Pop Artists, 1958–1968* at the Brooklyn Museum and *Power Up – Female Pop Art*, showing almost concurrently at the Kunsthalle Wien. Both shows included works by Pauline Boty, the British painter who died of cancer age twenty-eight in 1966, and Belgian artist Evelyne Axell, who died age thirty-seven in a road accident in 1972. While revising perceptions of women's roles in the evolution of Pop, the exhibitions also brought to mind two careers tragically cut short and posthumously overlooked.

It isn't supposed to work like that. As everyone knows, untimely death can do wonders to an artist's career. Many a cab driver has pointed this out to me. And with legions of pigment-martyrs who did a lot better after they'd snuffed it backed up through the history of art (with Van Gogh top of the list), why wouldn't you think that? There is an idea deeply embedded in culture that greatness is synonymous with extinction. Yet neither Boty nor Axell has garnered that greatness, their premature, sudden deaths serving to marginalise their contribution rather than confirm its importance.

It's no surprise that it was different with the boys. We readily accept the sudden and violent deaths of Mark Rothko (suicide) and Jackson Pollock (drunk-driving car crash) as grand tragedies that confirm greatness rather than shutting it down prematurely. In 1993, Cuban writer Severo Sarduy – famous for his work 'La Simulacion' ('Simulation', a 1982 essay about transvestites and painting) – suggested that Rothko's gory suicide was in fact the culmination of his search for the perfect red. This sentimental simulation, where art and corporeality come together, is hard to resist when painting is the medium – itself messy, bodily and loaded with destructive energies – and physical gesture is the key to an artist's output.

In this line of thinking, the detached physicality of Pollock's paintings (dripping from a vertical distance) could reflect detachment from the idea of crashing that a windscreen affords a drunk driver. The associations of splattering (often red?) paint over massive 'roads' of canvas need not be spelled out here, but the boozy, self-destructive mystique of his studio processes manages to infiltrate perceptions of the crash nevertheless – becoming justifications for it, even.

Simulation exerts the pull of an ideal completeness, reflecting back a sickly tribute from disaster, a final bonding of the myth to the canvas monuments left behind. Cinema often exploits such sentiments about art – the final scene in Robert Altman's *Vincent & Theo* (1990) ends with the artist's suicide while out painting in a wheat field. The gun goes off, Vincent's body drops from view and crows scatter into the air, perfectly simulating his painting *Wheatfield with Crows* (1890).

While culture has not created the same art-death mythology around the careers of Boty and Axell, something similar has taken place nevertheless. As writer Michael Bracewell has pointed out, Boty's work captured the light and glamorous freedom of the early 1960s as Pop emerged; and, as he also notes, she died exactly as that phase

gave way to darker

and more eroticised modulations of Pop – which are embodied, coincidentally, in Axell's paintings. In an uncanny mirroring of Boty's life and work, Axell's life ended exactly as that later phase of Pop itself fell away. Yet in this perfect alignment of life and times, simulation – the reductive cultural tendency to rhyme art gestures with an artist's death – has perhaps licensed a kind of unfortunate dismissal or amnesia in the case of Boty and Axell, similar to the logic of the musical one-hit wonder: perfect in the now, but necessarily fleeting. With careers and life spans so eerily aligned with the twin tenors of their historical moment, is this not a simulation that should illuminate importance, their deaths symbolic talismans of the period, gravely reflecting both the problems women painters faced in getting their work taken seriously at the time, and the transient nature of the developing culture that fascinated them?

These recent exhibitions, then, hopefully invite an extra correction, questioning the barriers to long-term relevance caused by a simulation between a disposable culture and the short lives of two women artists who engaged with it so notably, yet so briefly.

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