

IMPERSONATIONS Morimura, Colette, and Dellsperger in Costume

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Yasumasa Morimura, *An Inner Dialogue with Frida Kahlo*, Luhring Augustine, NY, 2001; Colette, *Maison de la Lumière*, Egizio's Project, NY, 2002; Brice Dellsperger, *Body Double 15*, Team Gallery, NY, 2002.

Yasumasa Morimura, the Japanese artist renowned for meticulous impersonations of the feminine icons found in European and North American entertainment and art, has now moved south. His project, *An Inner Dialogue with Frida Kahlo*, recreated the celebrated Mexican painter's fantastic self-portraits as a lush extravaganza of exotic Hollywood camp. Printed on canvas and often elaborately framed, Morimura's digitally manipulated photographs feature painted backdrops against which the artist is seen, dressed in replicas of Kahlo's elaborate folk costumes, sometimes accessorized with Japanese ribbons and flags. An unexpected affinity between Mexican and Japanese traditional attire emerges, most notably in *An Inner Dialogue with Frida Kahlo (Will to Live)*. Like a consummate geisha, Morimura sits on a wooden chair, festooned with heavy jewelry and solemnly holding a flag embroidered with the Chinese characters for "life" and "cut." Behind him is a hospital bed upon which he again appears, swathed

in sheets that open to reveal two bloody wounds in his back. The figures are set against a desolate landscape of rocks, under a sky half night, half day.

Morimura stares out intently from every photograph with a dignified hauteur that comes alive in his DVD projection, *Dialogue with Myself*. On a plain wooden bench with room for two, Morimura as Kahlo appears, fades away, and reappears in a series of beautiful costumes. As he calls out incomprehensible Spanish phrases in a manly voice, Morimura's graceful gestures display the art of a master *onnagata*, the male Kabuki actor that specializes in female roles. Dressed in a plain black suit and playing an electric keyboard, Morimura also appears as his masculine self, listening carefully to Kahlo's insistent speech and responding with musical sounds and words of Japanese. Performing as male and female, past and present, East and West, Morimura conveys a fierce determination to be understood, no matter what the language.



Colette, *Maison de la Lumière*, installation view at the third Montréal Biennial, 2002. Photos: Courtesy of the artist and Egizio's Project, NY.



Yasumasa Morimura, *An Inner Dialogue with Frida Kahlo (Will to Live)*, 2001. Photo: Courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine, NY.



Brice Dellsperger, *Body Double 15*, 2002. Photo: Courtesy the artist and Team Gallery, NY.

The idea of Morimura's separate self persists, perhaps because his impersonations cross gender lines. The artist Colette, on the other hand, appears to have dissolved the boundaries between her everyday self and the female characters she portrays. Assuming various historical identities, she is often seen at openings decked in ruffles and ringlets as if these are normal twentieth-century attire. Taking advantage of her strong resemblance to the Marquessa Casati, the heavily made-up and elaborately costumed early twentieth-century muse to such artists as D'Annunzio and van Dongen, Colette has transformed herself into glamorous women from Mata Hari to Marie Antoinette. Most often, she's played Olympia, sometimes reclining on a bed in the pose of Manet's infamous courtesan. In the nineties, however, she replaced herself with a mannequin, who will continue to appear. Thus, the reign of Olympia is now over, and Colette has resigned, although she can still be seen in costume at art world events.

The House of Olympia is now the *Maison de la Lumière*, an edifice decorated with paintings that were seen in an exhibition at Egizio's Project; the installation was one of the features of the third Montréal Biennial in 2002. After transferring digital photographs of herself and her environments to canvas, Colette coats them with paint and glitter—a process she calls “Colette-sizing.” The images are covered with dotted lines and layers of glitter and paint, as if light has dissolved all materiality. She presided over the exhibition as a mannequin looking in a mirror that is not a mirror, but another full-length self-portrait in which she is holding a

key. Like Miss Havisham's ghost, she exists in a world on the verge of being obliterated by glittering dust. Another self-portrait is festooned with bits of broken plaster molding. The rather tacky craftsmanship somehow manages to evoke the romance of ruin and decay.

For both Morimura and Colette artificial appearances are tools for dissolving the boundaries of gender, culture, and time. Neither artist is willing to let self be imposed by the outside world, nor do they attempt to seek it in inner authenticity. The consistency of their chosen appearances is the result of an exaggerated sense of style. Reaching back to the past, Colette shapes realities far from the boredom of everyday modernity, but her evocative masquerades lack Morimura's edgy transgression. His various identities may be contingent and temporary, but his attention to detail and grounding in Japanese tradition lends a piercing spirituality to his exquisite approach to drag.

Although Brice Dellsperger also uses himself as a vehicle for remaking art, his models are films, not paintings. Unlike Morimura and Colette, he uses other performers as well as himself. Since 1995, Dellsperger has been engaged in *Body Double*, a series of video projections that recreate popular films. In most, all the characters, both male and female, are played by a single actor, often a man in drag. Dellsperger's works turn dramas between separate individuals of differing gender into solitary dialogues among ambiguously gendered selves. Like a hall of mirrors, popular culture's artificiality reflects endlessly back upon itself. The three video projections on view at Dellsperger's exhibi-

tion at Team Gallery included *Body Double 15*, a remake of the museum chase scene in Brian de Palma's 1980 *Dressed to Kill*.

In the original, a well-dressed mother pays an afternoon visit to the Metropolitan Museum. A man wearing sunglasses sits on a bench beside her. When she removes her glove to reveal a wedding ring, he gets up and leaves. She follows, dropping the glove, and pursues him through the museum's many rooms. Losing him, she is tapped on the shoulder by a hand wearing her glove, and it's her turn to be pursued. As she raises her hand towards a floor plan, she suddenly realizes her glove is gone. Returning to the bench, she remembers the gloved hand on her shoulder. The pursuit is renewed. Finally she sees his hand idly flapping her glove outside the window of a taxi. She approaches, and he pulls her into the car. Are they strangers or lovers playing an elaborate kinky game? We never can be sure. Without dialogue, we experience their encounter through music, alternating between her point of view and close-ups of emotions passing over her face. After a tryst in a fancy apartment, she discovers a letter notifying her lover that he has a venereal disease. Next, she is brutally slashed to death in the elevator. The killer turns out to be her own psychiatrist, whose split personality drives him to disguise himself as a woman and kill the women his male side desires. For both killer and victim, a female identity is clearly very hazardous.

In Dellsperger's version (set to the original music), a gentler interaction takes

place: an androgynous conversation between a dual-sexed pair of twins. Seen from the rear, Dellsperger enters a German museum, in ladylike makeup, high heels, coat, skirt, blouse, and gloves. Seated on a bench in front of a series of bright monochrome prints, he writes in a notebook and impatiently looks around. His double soon appears, identically dressed, and a tender yet farcical pursuit ensues. Throughout the chase, the camera seems to waver. Taking on Dellsperger's drag identity, we see through this unsteady eye, and experience a dreamlike sensation of floating erratically through the museum, never quite having our feet on the ground. De Palma's chase between male and female, with its consequences fraught with violence and fear, is replaced by a fragmentary circular narrative that follows a person of ambiguous gender, pursuing him or herself through a labyrinth of rooms.

Body doubles negate the idea of essential selves, as does the transvestite's contrived persona. Standing in for valuable people in dangerous situations—decoys guarding politicians against assassination, substitutes for movie stars in stunts and sex scenes—body doubles prevent things from happening to celebrities. Whatever happens happens to nobody, but in this case, nothing happens. Narrative disappears. Lightly humorous, but slightly uncanny, Dellsperger enacts a delicately open-ended romance between a pair of illusory selves. Nobody is in love with its double, with whom it never catches up. The museum is never escaped, and the affair remains unsummated.

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