

Good Homes Make Contented Workers

The emergence of the concept of intimacy is a key point in the history of the Western family. Thanks to advent of privacy, one's housing has become the center of one's personal universe. It stands for a microcosm that requires to be maintained. Constructed according to a model of concentric circles, the public character tends to decrease as one approaches the nucleus. The gap between private and public was widened by the accessibility and distribution of different types of spaces for each gender. This is the reason why the concept of "home" holds a double meaning: intimacy for men and isolation for women.

The notion of interior has always played an important role in the bourgeois aesthetic. The concept of "good taste" implied that the living room was not really regarded as a private space as such, but rather as an illustrative space for the outside, where women played nothing but a decorative role. We know that the inclusion of women's activities in the domestic sphere went hand in hand with her expulsion from the economic world. Previous family functions gradually moved outside her sphere as privacy became more central to family life.

In her artistic practice, Sylvie Macias Diaz has developed visual strategies which refer to the ideologies of intimacy and the perfect family. Thus, the photomontage *Panel* - above the shelf of the sculpture *Kit à Monter* (DIY Kit) (2004) - reveals a young housewife in an elegant interior taken from a Beaufort catalog. The drawing represents a woman on her knees cleaning up the floor. This depiction closely resembles the propaganda illustrations promoting the rationalization of domestic work.

In the 20s and 30s of last century, the American and European reformers put the emphasis on rationalization in order to ease the housewife's task. The American chemist Christine Frederick suggested to apply Taylor's theories on the *scientific management of enterprises* to the family. Assuming that women have to work according to a certain schedule, she advocated for the use of organizational patterns and for the abolishment of unnecessary efforts. By decreasing the amount of domestic work, it was believed that women's status would be improved. They could consequently spend more time for personal activities or for taking care of their husbands and children.

In the beginning of the 20th century, the historical avant-garde also began to question the traditional techniques by incorporating pieces of paper, fabric or wallpaper for instance to their works. Cubism gave way to collage as a means of expression able to exceed the subservience to bourgeois norms. Moving to photomontage, it became the main artist's weapon in the struggle against established conventions. From today's perspective, collage and photomontage seem to maintain a vivid connection with the way artists work in a pluralistic and virtual world that is dominated by digitalization and visual spectacles. Moreover, a central concern for modernism was based on its ability to become visible in the urban life by means of mass media.

Sylvie Macias Diaz merges interior design advertisements and female figures together through visual strategies similar to those of the early 20th century. She also sheds the light on both advertising which encourages the housewife to consume and the propaganda which constrain the latter into a clearly defined role. In the series *Femmes d'intérieur* (2003), she applies this approach to the syndrome of the "Green Widow", a concept linked to early feminist theories that implicitly refers to depression, loneliness and feelings of uselessness that experienced women who lived in dormitory towns, far away from the cities in the middle of the countryside.

And history repeats itself. In a playful imitation of Martha Rosler, whose photomontages *Bringing the War Home: House Beautiful* (1967-1972), conveyed a feminist critique of U.S. military intervention in Vietnam, the timeless calm of daily routine in the luxurious house is suddenly

interrupted. The feminine space, which mirrors the male space, is about to be attacked by a small army of paratroopers who withdrew from the war in Iraq and who will shatter once and for all the myth of domestic quietness.

Ronald Van de Sompel
(December 14, 2008)

Text translated in French from Dutch by Françoise Hosteaux
Translated in English from French by Henri J Sandront