

Sum ergo sum: Pauline Marcelle

by Renée Gadsden

Pauline Marcelle is a contemporary artist, in the literal sense of the word. Her art is focused on and inspired by the things she sees and experiences every day. Marcelle is best known for her colorful large scale paintings, as well as her dramatic video works. She focuses on human needs and desires, lusts and passions, which are lived out individually and in the group. Her series of videos, *The Eatings* (2003-2006), show close-ups of half naked men and women, breaking, rubbing and tearing ripe fruits as they eat, suck, lick and then stuff them with abandon into their mouths. What begins with erotic overtones (*Agnes Eats* and *Alissa Eats* feature the bared breasts of the eating women) ends quickly in revulsion and repugnance, as the haste and greed displayed in the eating of the fruits replaces erotic titillation with associations of debauchery. The work is not only a commentary on individual excess; it is also a statement about the way society deals with themes of food production, distribution and consumption.

Marcelle's work is enigmatic. The *Bend Down Boutique* paintings are a series of works triggered by the sight of piles of clothing, washed up on the beach in Ghana, in 2007. To her horror, she realized after speaking and interacting with the residents whose beach the clothes had landed upon, that these clothes had been transformed. No longer were they the helpful charity objects as intended when they left Europe. By being dumped in bales at their destination point and neglected, they had gotten out of control. Like a plague of nasty seaweed, these clothes choked the coast and made it impossible for the children to swim in the ocean. Perhaps one of her intentions with the paintings is to reclaim the beauty that the clothes, as she witnessed them, destroyed.

It could be said that the *Bend Down Boutique* is quite political. What is fascinating about Pauline Marcelle's work is that the political aspects are not overt and easily readable. From the formal aspect, one enjoys the optically appealing, boldly placed red, blue and yellow primary colors of the paintings, on deep black, crisp white or clear gray backgrounds. The artist uses oil paint to achieve such vivid color effects, and invested quite much time into the paintings. "Painting this series has made me patient" is a comment Marcelle made about the *Bend Down Boutique* series.

Shimmering underneath the paint, or else outlined by it, are the washed out images of the photographs that Marcelle took of the debris and masses of clothing as they lay on the beach, and then had printed onto the canvases she painted over. She is not an investigative journalist, yet her camera documented horrendous conditions and her images proclaim "J'accuse" to a so-called system of "help" for Africa. Or do they? Is Marcelle more interested in exploring societal processes, or in stimulating individual consciences?

In a way, looking at the paintings as a guileless art-interested person parallels the act of throwing one's old clothing into a collection box. One innocently wants to get rid of extra clothing that is cluttering up one's life. and at the same time feels

that a good deed is being done to help some “underprivileged” persons. Without knowing that the clothing that ends up in the box might very well contribute to destroying the ecosystem of another country, and could actually be making life worse and more difficult for the intended recipients. Like much contemporary art, Marcelle has created in the *Bend Down Boutique* works that can only be fully understood if explained. The viewer of the paintings does not necessarily know what they are “seeing” if there is no accompanying text or explanation. This explaining (or absence of it) is then a political act, and makes the works even more intriguing. It is not difficult to make loud works of art that descry social conditions, but Marcelle is not interested in being loud or obvious. She moves on various different levels at once: her canvases can be enjoyed and deeply appreciated as l’art pour l’art, as well as being appreciated as witnesses to contemporary conditions.

Pauline Marcelle’s oeuvre is multi-faceted, a reflection of herself as a person and an artist. An accomplished painter, she also makes objects, directs and produces films, including animated films, and does performance art and music. A look at some of her earlier works confirms the deep interest in the workings of society that we see in this series of paintings as well. The *Floating Picnic: Platform for a Global Balanced Diet* (2007) is a raft installation and performance developed by Marcelle (with Ianthe Jackson.) It addresses issues of how waterways are used and accessed in New York City and in the rest of the world, and what role food, or nutrition, together with water plays in different cultures and among different populations. One of Marcelle’s most gripping works is the 10 minute video *Paradogs* (2000), which depicts dogs viciously fighting and the people who jeer and encourage their deadly confrontation. *Paradogs* is clearly not only about dog fighting; it is a depiction of societal mechanisms involving winners and losers, fair play and dirty tricks, greed and gambling.

Not only is her work complex and multi-layered, Pauline Marcelle herself cannot be so easily pinned down. She considers herself to be a trailblazer, in terms of crossing or ignoring skin color boundaries in the art world. Marcelle’s piece *Double Six* (2001-2004, multimedia video installation) includes oversized domino stones that can be played by the public. This so-called game she links with “battlefield properties” and also calls it “an experience where compromise and negotiation have no interaction in this pure state of combat.” *Double Six* explores issues of social communication that are universal. In this work there is no black or white, except on the domino stones themselves. Her 2003 photography-video installation *What’s that got to do with me?* examines issues of urbanism and human interaction in New York, and again, cannot be said to have been made by a Black artist.

Sometimes, however, she does choose to highlight her Blackness. Pauline Marcelle created the Black Lisa figure, “posed as a political image mediating high and low”, and has also created works, such as *Black Lisa Red* (2004, oil and digiprint on canvas) and made installations under that name (the 2003 “BLACK LISA Space@ McKinsey & Company Inc.”, Vienna.) Nonetheless, the perception of Marcelle in the public eye is not only of her own choice. She is a strong projection surface for others. One writer from her home island of Dominica called her a “deeply patriotic Dominican artist”, although that seems to be a much too reductionist way to describe her. Marcelle, who grew up in New York, lived and studied in other parts of the United States, finished her studies in Vienna and married and founded a

family with an Austrian, must be seen in many ways as being beyond categories of nationality and skin color.

Still, one can look at the work of Pauline Marcelle in light of the current discussion about post-black art. The curator and writer Thelma Golden coined this controversial term with friend and artist Glenn Ligon in the 1990s to refer to a post-civil rights generation of African-American artists whose work she believed could no longer be defined in terms of 'race'. The term "post-black art" reflects the controversy about the globalization of the art of the African diaspora and current notions of cultural difference.

One artist that Marcelle admires is the British painter Chris Ofili, winner of the 1998 Turner Prize. Ofili is of Nigerian descent, grew up in England and attended the Royal College of Arts. He currently lives in the Caribbean. His paintings use an international language of form, but contain unmistakable references to his Nigerian heritage. Ofili can of course be included in the post-black debate as well, but must skin color be the dividing line? Perhaps "post-(birth) culture" is a more accurate phrase to describe many of the artists who are currently and increasingly gaining international notice. Just as Subodh Gupta is certainly "post-Indian" and Ai Weiwei is "post-Chinese" – neither of them post-black – but all of them, just as Pauline Marcelle, post-(birth) culture.

Gloria Steinem, Shirley Chisolm, Betty Friedan, Alice Schwarzer are names associated with the advancement of women's rights in the last decades. Chisolm, in 1968 the first Black woman to be elected to the U.S. Congress, often said that the discrimination she experienced had more to do with her sex than with her skin color. Pauline Marcelle speaks of her experiences in the art world primarily in terms of people's reaction to her color, but she is a strong and outspoken person, and the question is if the reactions she provokes are not also because of being a woman player in a primarily male game. The content of her work is sensual, even sexual at times, and often has a definite feminist slant. One example of this, the short animated film *The Snake Steps* (2000), shows the journey of a snake, that bears an almost unmistakable resemblance to a sperm, through various landscapes, weather and nature scenarios. When shortly before the end of the film the words "and she came" appear, and the snake/sperm is, after that, seen no more.

Pauline Marcelle and her art stimulate and provoke. She creates works that are a feast for the senses, but at the same time provide a challenge for the intellect. She is a person constantly in search of a language through which she can explore her artistic interests and identities. This restlessness and striving fertilizes the art world wherever she appears. That is why Pauline Marcelle is welcome wherever she goes.