

“Gender Games” Marilyn Waligore 1993

Marilyn Waligore’s provocative photographs challenge the viewer to re-think cultural constructs about women. Her large format color photographs particularly focus on love and courtship with a sub plot of sex and violence. In a still life format, she plays with such culturally loaded objects as dolls, clothes, and gravestones to invoke the game of family and cultural rituals that constrain and confine women. These rituals include such designations as “old maid” and the “biological clock” two phrases for a related social mythology that value women only in a reproductive function.

Key to the impact of the photographs is the transformation of the original objects almost beyond recognition by means of color reversal, and the subversion of feminine color to irritating hues of purples and pinks. Waligore also uses scale shifts and bizarre juxtapositions that are difficult to decipher. The artist draws from kitsch objects such as a “knife ran away with the spoon” salt and pepper shaker arranged in macabre still life arrangements that underline the concept of a cultural masquerade. In another work, a figurine of a pink cheeked cinderella sugar shaker becomes a sorceress with glowing yellow eyes against a background of broken glass and lurid, huge scaled purple shoes. No literal human figures appear, only cultural simulacra, mediated by social stereotypes/ Waligore’s contemporary still lifes are ironic commentary on the traditional concept of still life. She presents the stasis and imprisonment of gender clichés, a true “still life” instead of the traditional fruits, flowers, and game animals all of which were often metaphors for male desire. The photographs also combine still life arrangements with text that quotes from clichés, providing another layer of social reference.

Waligore interrupts coherent reading of her images, seeking rather to intervene in a narrative reading and create tensions through ambiguity and irony. Her images function as hieroglyphs of personal fantasy and memory, more than as clear symbols or metaphors in a narrative discourse. In seeking material for her still life compositions she avoids the obvious, already loaded cultural images such as Mickey Mouse or Barbie Doll, seeing instead those with less clear baggage based in fairy tales or childhood rhymes. Kitsch, or “precious little things” in German has often been seen simply as the antithesis of avant-garde art. Waligore uses kitsch as an avant-garde strategy to (re)present cultural constructs invigorated by ironic commentaries and artistic transformations.

In earlier work, created in Wooster, Ohio Waligore photographed found still life in storefront display. Since moving to Dallas five years ago, she has found the highly controlled and repetitive imagery of commercial strip malls in suburbia less inspiring, so she has turned to studio still life arrangements. Most recently she has begun to work with historical references, such as imagery and text drawn from encyclopedias as historical markers of our cultural heritage. Her photographs convey not only the gender issues in our society in general, but also the disjunctive tensions of the modern woman in collision with traditional female roles, an issue that emerges so clearly in Texas.