

Essay: *Eva Díaz* reconsiders
the radicality of Marisol's art

Decorative, Classy and Other Pejoratives



At times, I can't believe what the most famous female artists of the 1960s accomplished, both in their first flushes of fame and beyond. I think especially of three whose practices boldly confronted gender identity and sexuality: Yayoi Kusama, Marisol and Niki de Saint Phalle. Their work, with its often overtly carnal nature, its carnivalesque pageantry and play, is nothing short of revolutionary. Portraying women's pleasure, they charted a path for erotic liberation and, in some ways, anticipated, yet remained a generational prior to, the collectivist project of second-wave feminism.

Then, at other times, I get pissy that each of these women grew up exceedingly rich and was also a fashion model (De Saint Phalle) or a photogenic media darling (Marisol). These factors no doubt played a large role in their early career success. This trio, in particular, was formed of *ingénues* – one of art history's most critically tarnished roles.

To avoid becoming resentful, envious or depressed, I think of other contemporaneous women who also took on female power and sexuality in frank, disturbing and trailblazing ways: artists like Ida Applebroog, Lee Bontecou, Lee Lozano, Faith Ringgold, Betye Saar, Zilia Sánchez Domínguez, Nancy Spero and other (mostly) figurative artists born c.1930. These slightly less famous female artists lacked prodigious financial resources and did not hit it big by the age of 35 – at least not on the global scale of Kusama, Marisol or De Saint Phalle.

Previous page
Hans Namut, *Marisol*, c.1960. Courtesy: Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona

Below
Hugh Hefner, 1967. Courtesy: *TIME* Magazine

Opposite page
Tea for Three, 1960. Unless otherwise stated, all images courtesy: Estate of Marisol/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

The thing is, the work of both the rich and the poor women artists of this generation, who came of age in the 1940s and '50s, inspires me. The traumatizing sexism, violence and, in the cases of women of colour, racism they experienced, metabolized and eventually bravely rebelled against is extraordinary.

But niggling ole me can't *wholly* separate the biography from the work, because I know how fucking hard and exhausting it is to be creative without resources and how this always affects the work. You have to do things you don't want to do A LOT of the time: a lack of independence euphemistically termed 'creative compromise'. You don't have the money to be free, bereft of a trust fund, an inheritance or a financially advantageous marriage to coast on. Poverty, routine economic oppression, is always nipping at your heels.

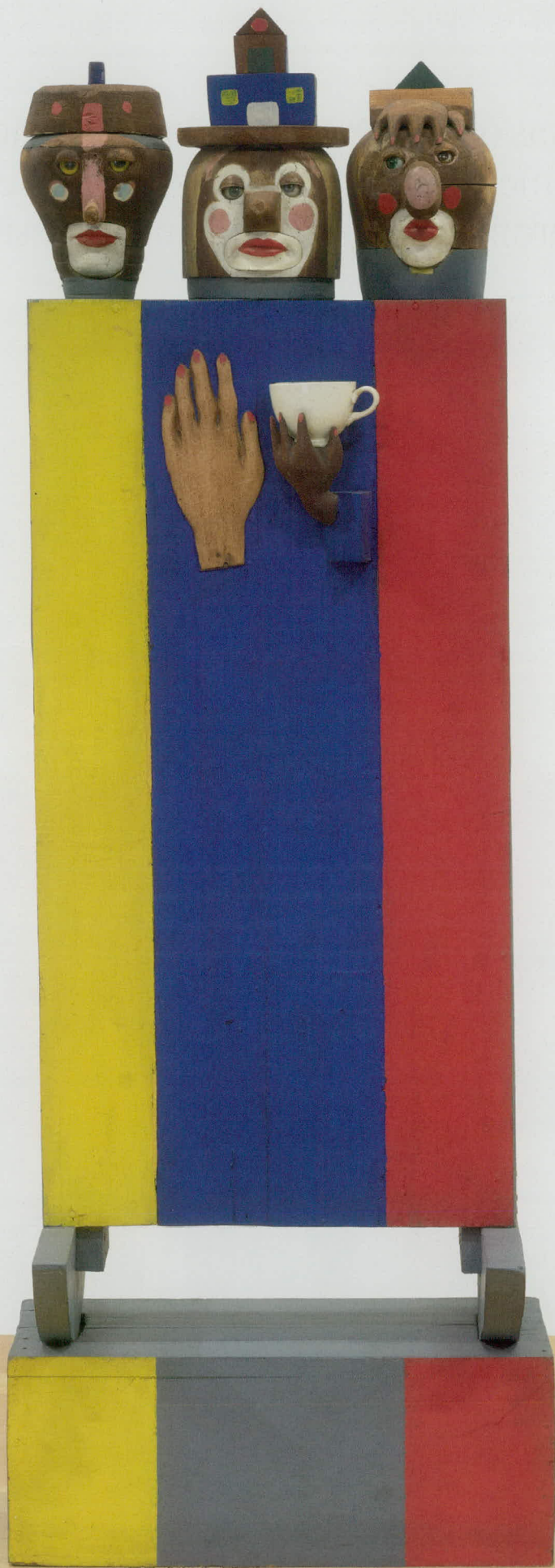
There has been much talk, post #MeToo, of separating the 'man' from the 'work', in the cases of Pablo Picasso and other cradle-robbers and women-abusers. But we must also consider other forms of privilege that facilitate a career becoming publicly visible. In Marisol's case, her wealth insulated her from all manner of demands and accountability. Even before she became famous, she declared in her journal in 1956: 'I am the Venezuelan, born in France, living in Italy – that has an English car with North American plates and Swiss insurance – and they want to ask me what nationality I am.'

Buffalo AKG Art Museum curator Cathleen Chaffee responded to this statement in the museum catalogue for 'Marisol: A Retrospective' – which opens this month at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts – writing: 'One recognizes in these self-assessments of her different personae the privilege of a white-passing Latin American immigrant with the resources to adopt expensive hobbies.' Such is the guilelessness of extreme privilege that can float the rich above the depressing realities of class inequality, that day-to-day enervation – the struggle, the grind, the hustle – that forecloses creative possibilities for so many.

When I first considered Marisol's survey, I immediately thought of a work of hers that always annoyed me: her portrait of *Playboy* founder Hugh Hefner, commissioned by and published on the cover of *TIME* magazine on 3 March 1967. I then recalled her famous *Self-Portrait* (1961–62), which was a standout work in last year's 'New York: 1962–1964' at the Jewish Museum, where it was first exhibited in 1966. The Hefner work is not in 'Marisol: A Retrospective', or the accompanying catalogue, nor was it in 'Warhol and Marisol Take New York' at the Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh in 2021. (This particular self-portrait, however, is in both.)

Don't get me wrong, Marisol is awesome. The recent catalogue is a trove of delights and the show – travelling to Toledo Art Museum next, before arriving at Buffalo AKG Art Museum and then Dallas Museum of Art – will be a must-see. Even though Marisol was young, very rich and model-like, she was also eventually not those things. She lived too large travelling the world at the peak of her fame and, given her predisposition to not give a shit about money, coming as she did from extravagant Venezuelan oil wealth, she essentially walked away from her career to scuba dive for half a decade in remote locations at immense expense. And, even when she 'had





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it all', she was still a woman, which, in 1965, presented powerful men and women (and not so powerful men) yet another opportunity to be condescending, churlish and misogynistic about a female artist's success.

She was also a woman who existed in a stew of pernicious, exoticizing stereotypes about her *Latinidad*. Marisol bequeathed her estate to Buffalo AKG Art Museum, which has meticulously explored key elements of her career, emphasizing the ecological polemics of her post-diving, aquatic-inspired works; her frequent collaborations with choreographers Louis Falco, Martha Graham and Elisa Monte; the graphic renderings of sexuality and sexual violence in her drawings, as well as the ambiguous co-existence of desire and repulsion in them; and the oddities of her public commissions. In 1966, Eva Hesse left a studio visit with Marisol with very critical thoughts, complaining in her diary that the elder artist left 'too much on the surface - design, decoration. Mystery is lost. She cannot any longer just attach dime-store paraphernalia all over [...] When her pieces hide something from the viewer, we look at [them] differently.'

Back to Mr. Playboy. In line with Hesse's critique, Marisol's sculpture of Hefner hides nothing; instead, it employs excess and duplications to great and sometimes jarring effect. Given Marisol's strength as a caricaturist, it is overall an exceedingly flattering portrait. Donated by *TIME* to the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C., the work, which is just under two metres tall, is slightly larger than the real Hef, who apparently topped out at 1.75 metres. The body is painted on a vertically oriented narrow rectangular box; its leftmost area retains the exposed plywood, while the central portion depicts its red-cardiganed subject with arms crossed and left hand grasping his signature pipe. The right section of the box around Hef's body is painted in royal blue. An actual black leather loafer protrudes from the bottom of his right trouser leg, jutting out of the plinth. Atop this rectangle sits a wonky fish/torpedo-like form, also made of wood, set perpendicular to the big box. Projecting about twelve inches in front of the body, this long cylindrical object is flattened to contain the face of its subject, drawn in pencil. The plane of the face has a prominent wooden nose attached and a second, carved-wood pipe extending from its mouth. The rear of the sculpture - we'll call it that because it's also Hef's rear - paints a facsimile of his backside, its tight black pants a little less ruffled and baggy than on the frontside, with his left hand visible again. (Although it holds the pipe in front, the hand on the rear appears without it.) The fish-like skull tapers in the back, ending about one metre behind the body. Pictured on the cover of *TIME*, with the magazine's signature red border, the sculpture is angled away from the viewer against a black background. Though the plinth is receding, the column-like head swells forward to cover part of the 'M' in *TIME*, while a yellow sash of text proclaiming 'The Pursuit of Hedonism' slices over the 'T' and the 'I'. Asked about the cover, Hefner remarked: 'I thought it was very classy.' His response echoes one of the justifications we used to hear about the magazine's objectification and sexualization of women: *Playboy* is classy; subscribe for the articles.



Left
Marisol, I Love You,
1974

Below
Self-Portrait, 1961-62.
Courtesy: Estate
of Marisol/Artists
Rights Society
(ARS), New York,
and MCA Chicago

Opposite page
Women and Dog, 1963-64.
Courtesy: Estate of Marisol/
Artists Rights Society (ARS),
New York, and Whitney
Museum of American Art,
New York



Right
Louis Falco Dance
Company, *Caviar*, 1970,
performance view.
Courtesy: Marisol
Papers and Buffalo AKG
Art Museum

Below
*American Merchant
Mariners' Memorial*, 1991,

Opposite page
Diptych, 1971



She lived too large, travelling the world at the peak of her fame.



I'd never actually read Gloria Steinem's 1963 exposé about her time working as a Bunny at the 59th Street Manhattan Playboy Club.² So, I did.

It's just as nasty a world as I had anticipated: very young women falsely promised generous salaries, who instead toil long hours as near-naked waitresses and coat girls, pawed as chattel by drunk men who feel themselves entitled to making rapey passes at them and subjected to a humiliating system of demerits and body-shaming by the Playboy corporation. I asked a former Playmate I know about her experiences of working at Hefner's Los Angeles mansion and relaunched New York club before he died in 2017. (Playmates have been centrefolds in the magazine; Bunnies have not.) She confirmed that it was just as bad in the 2010s and that – while men propositioned her for dinner dates, wanting her as arm candy and for potential sexual favours – she was always broke: dinners don't pay the rent. The whole enterprise had calcified into a time capsule of the sexism and female dependency on men's money of its founding moment in 1953.

So, there's this weirdness to Marisol producing a slightly satirical but largely heroizing portrait of one of the most retrograde figures of the 20th century: a man who fancied himself a figure of sexual liberation, yet whose fetishistic portrayal of women rendered them servants to male desire. White, upper-class women have often been criticized for their tolerance of – if not active support for – other forms of inequality, embedded as they are within racist, patriarchal, settler-colonialist power. And here we find Marisol.

When asked why Hef has two pipes in her portrait, Marisol craftily responded: 'He has too much of everything.'³ In some ways, the same could be said of her. Yet, this excess, pushed to the point of derangement, is what makes her works, most of which utilized casts of her face and body, incredibly powerful. In *Self-Portrait*, the large rectangular block that forms the figure's enormous torso rests on the floor on its long side, from which protrude seven heads, six limbs and one set of breasts. There was often too much Marisol in her works, which became polymorphous ciphers for female excess: profligate desire, will and intensity.

The *TIME* issue featuring Marisol's cover mentioned that she had also been asked to produce work for another project, on the topic of Playboy Playmates: 'Marisol thought about it for a while, then declined because she "couldn't think of anything interesting to do. They look like caricatures already."' Marisol. Exercising a powerful and very privileged 'No' ●

1 Elon Green, 'When *Playboy* Went Mainstream', *TIME*, 12 November 2014

2 Gloria Steinem, 'A Bunny's Tale', Part I, *Show*, May 1963, pp. 90–93, pp. 114–115; Part II, *Show*, June 1963, pp. 66–68, pp. 110–116

3 'A Letter from the Publisher', *TIME*, 3 March 1967

