

HYPERALLERGIC

ART • WEEKEND

The Fearless Faces of a Feminist Firebrand

With her series of plastic surgeries, ORLAN wasn't using her face simply in a performance, but as an art material.

Anthony Haden-Guest November 2, 2019



ORLAN, "Vierge blanche sortant du noir" (1978), black-and-white photograph, 164 x 124 cm (© A.Mole, courtesy Ceysson & Benetiere)

In an art world choc-a-bloc with undemanding, well-made Postmodernism, it's invigorating to confront an outlier whose work can still discomfit after half a century. ORLAN is such an artist and [SAINT ORLAN](#), her solo show at Ceysson & Benetiere at 956 Madison Avenue, her first Manhattan show in more than 20 years, is a brisk survey of aspects of her ongoing project of self-reinvention.

We first spoke some years back when ORLAN (singly named, with a preference for all-caps) was well through the sequence of nine plastic surgeries which had enabled her to create the single work of art for which she is best known, her equivalent of

Robert Indiana's *Love* or Damien Hirst's shark: Her face.

A medical emergency was the kickstarter. In 1978 ORLAN went into surgery with an ectopic pregnancy, a condition in which the fetus is not attached to the uterus, putting the mother at risk, and so must be removed. She took along a video crew to record the process, through which she was anesthetized but awake, and which she describes as a near-holy experience.



ORLAN, "Sainte Thérèse en extase, Sainte ORLAN en Assomption" (1978), photocopying and collage on cardboard enhanced with pastel, 80 x 100 cm (© studio Rémi Villaggi, courtesy Ceysson & Benetiere)

That same year she followed up with the real-time *Documentary Study: The Head of Medusa* — essentially a performance during which she offered her genitalia for live inspection with a magnifying glass during her period. But the series of facial operations, which followed between 1990 and 1993, were to provide a more durable confrontation with expectations, most specifically the male gaze. ORLAN wasn't using her face just in a performance, but as an art material, turning it into an in-everybody-else's-face work of art.

There have famously been traditions of extreme modifications of the female body since prehistoric times. Baby girls would have their feet bound in China so that an adult foot might be only three inches long, a practice only abandoned at the beginning of the 20th century. Neck lengthening was not uncommon among tribes in Africa and Southeast Asia. ORLAN told me she has images of such.

The most novel element in her personal contribution to the body of evidence, so to speak, was the notion of positioning a bump on either side of her temple. The surgeon applied implants normally used in the reshaping of cheeks, adding them towards the end of the series of ops. Snarky critics have compared them to horns ever since, but I felt they gave her an intergalactic look that would have been a good fit on the flight deck of the Starship Enterprise.



Portrait of ORLAN by Anthony Haden-Guest (courtesy of the artist)

ORLAN wasn't hard to spot as I walked up Madison Avenue towards the gallery. Her hair seemed taller than it was at our last meeting, rising straight up, expanding as it went, like an old-fashioned shaving brush or a flower on a thistle, except that this flower was bifurcated, half glimmery-black as coal, half snow-white. The reaction of our fellow pedestrians was low-key, but no surprise there — hell, these are New Yorkers — as

we walked indoors to the show.

ORLAN's face connects her with several Post-World War II artists who, rather than constitute an Ism, can be characterized as an eruption of individuals or groupuscules, alike in their urgent need to take their art out of the gallery

system and into the world by way of body-based practices involving risk of pain and injury. They included Vienna Aktionismus; Gina Pane, who would put out fire with her hands and, in one piece, clambered barefoot up a ladder with bladed metal pieces stuck into the rungs, stopping only when the pain became excruciating; Chris Burden in such performances as his crucifixion on the roof of a Volkswagen and crawling bare-chested over broken glass up a Los Angeles freeway; and work by Dennis Oppenheim, such as his 1970 piece, *Reading Position for a Second Degree Burn*.

ORLAN respects these and other artists who have made their own bodies their principal raw material, such as Stelarc, from Australia, who has hung himself from hooks embedded in his flesh, and Genesis P-Orridge, who in 1995 had surgical body modifications so as to resemble his wife, Lady Jaye.



ORLAN, "Opérations-chirurgicales-performances" (1993), Cibachrome under Diasec, 62 41.5 inches (courtesy Ceysson & Benetiere)

But she makes a clear distinction between such work, which she calls "Body Art," and "Carnal Art" — namely her own. "Carnal art is different from Body art," she says. "Body art is an art in which the artists are working at the limits of the body, the physical and psychological limits of the body. They are making themselves suffer." Carnal Art was born of the perception learned during that first operation. "The body can be surgically modified without suffering," she said,

There is plentiful documentation of her operations up at Ceysson & Benetiere, both verbal and photographic. In one photo she shows off her bruised and puffy post-operational features. No Artist's Statement though. "I wanted to interrogate all the stereotypes about beauty" she told me. "You

have to understand that it was not a personal operation, to make myself more beautiful. It was an operation to change an image, to fabricate a new image, and so to have more images for my work. That was the purpose of the piece."

One operation stood out. Why the bumps?

Decision-making was a long, long process, she said. In French: "*C'est un petit dereglement, un dereglement d'image seulement.*" A minor disruption. A disruption of the image only.

Beautification it wasn't, for sure. But I pointed out that, as we spoke, she was wearing lipstick and eyeliner. That was ordinary make-up but I had also seen thick gold make-up applied to the bumps. So, beautification wasn't off the table? Right?

"All my life I like to mix the true and the false," ORLAN said. "In my life and in my art. That is very important for me. It is a lesson that came to me from the Baroque. I traveled a lot through Italy and made many photographs," she said. And she had become increasingly impressed by baroque art. "Bernini is important for me. And it is important for me that Baroque is considered the monster of the classic. Like the woman is considered the monster of the man."

This took me a bit aback. By just who, I asked?

"It is written," she said, firmly.



ORLAN, "Etude documentaire, Le Drapé, Le Baroque Palazzo Grassi, Venise #04, 1979" (2014), Prestige print, wooden frame, plexiglass, 42 x 52 cm (© A.Mole, courtesy Ceysson & Benetiere)

Which brings me to an element in ORLAN's work which is distinct from her physical alterations but just as disconcerting.

Bernini's "Ecstasy of Saint Teresa" (1647–1652) is focal. Saint Teresa of Avila was a Spanish noblewoman, born in 1515, still highly regarded as a writer, whose observations could be mordant – *May God preserve me from gloomy saints*, was one – but also intense. Her description of an angelic vision, which occurs in the autobiographical compilation, *The Life of Saint Teresa of Avila by Herself* (1588), has given rise to

sometimes dry commentary ever since.

It reads in part:

In his hands I saw a great golden spear and at the iron tip there appeared to be a point of fire. This he plunged into my heart several times so that it penetrated to my entrails. [...] The pain was so severe that it made me utter several moans. The sweetness caused by this intense pain is so extreme that one cannot possibly wish it to cease, nor is one's soul then content with anything but God. This is not a physical, but a spiritual pain, though the body has some share in it – even a considerable share.

This is the ecstasy Bernini caught. ORLAN likewise, if from another angle. “That is the lesson that came to me from the Baroque,” ORLAN says. “The Baroque shows us a Saint Teresa who [is] in an ecstasy which is both erotic *and* aesthetic. And that for me is important because, in the Christian religion you always have to choose between good and evil. The Virgin Mary or Mary Magdalen, the Whore.”

One dominant presence in the show was a large, voluminously filmy photograph showing a woman a-swirl in baroque drapery. This memorializes a live performance at the Palazzo Grassi in Venice in 1979, during which ORLAN was carried in a plexiglass shrine and bared one breast. “All my works are made to play with the notion of AND. Like the good and the bad, the true and the false,” she says. “That is why I like maquillage and mascara and at the same time, something very profound, which was the transformation of my body into a new sculpture.



ORLAN, “LES FEMMES QUI PLEURENT SONT EN COLÈRE, n.5” (2019), collage (courtesy of the artist)

Orlan is now back in Paris studio, hard at it on two other projects. The first is the ORLANOID, a life-size robot with a facsimile of her head topping a transparent body, loaded with parts, including a number of oddly placed eyes; she is working with a team of AI researchers to amp up its tech capabilities.

The second is focused on the neglected muses of certain 20th-century masters. “It begins when Picasso painted Dora Maar while she was weeping.” Orlan told me. The work product has been a set of what she calls “hybridized photographs,” which is to say images that have been collaged and drawn upon, each with misplaced eyes alongside the nose, mouth open in an anguished shriek, and tears coursing down their cheeks. A show opens formally in the Sorbonne Art Gallery on the Place du Pantheon on November 8 and will run until January 14.

SAINT ORLAN continues at Ceysson & Benetiere (956 Madison Avenue, Upper East Side, Manhattan) through November 2.

MORE FROM HYPERALLERGIC

