

Gaëlle Choisne
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WOMEN ARE FROM
VENUS



In 2014, Pharrell Williams and Perrotin introduced us to *Girl*, which had been an exhibition conceived to acknowledge and applaud the lightness of femininity. Fast forward 10 years, and the *Girl* has matured and reinterpreted herself through *Femmes*, another exhibition staged by Pharrell and Perrotin. Displaying the creations of nearly 40 artists, *Femmes* looks to focus on the multifaceted nature of Black womanhood. Ultimately, it is an evolution as much as it is a reflection, a celebration as much as a contemplation. Below METAL speaks with Gaëlle Choisne, one of its participating artists, about her transformation and the process behind it.

It's been explained that "at its heart, *Femmes* is an anthem, leading the marching band of Black joy by creating spaces for ongoing and cultural shifts. It is a celebration, a call to honour the artists – these Soldiers of Love – who transform the world through the power of their hands." In which way do you believe *Femmes* prompts audiences to see Black women and where do you recognise yourself amidst this, particularly as a participating artist?

Of course this exhibition can be difficult, in a way it's become a categorisation. But, I think it's also in this troubled world where women, in general, and Black women, are not really recognised. I consider this participation as a statement in a way. Of course there's the fact it's Pharrell who curated the show, there's a lot of influence, so it's a commercial way to speak about it, but also I like the fact it's really light. It brings joy and in this sense it looks a lot deeper than we imagine.

This nearly 40 strong artists exhibition transforms the *Girl* (2014) into the *femme*. Is there a maturation you hope is acknowledged and a continuation you hope is appreciated even more so? At the same time, have there been any parallels between your girlhood and womanhood?

Yes, because I think there is a connotation in each work. *Girl* (2014) was polite, light and I don't want to say less consideration as there was another routine, in a way, behind the exhibition. *Femmes* is another field, *Femmes* is about creation, creativity, it's about recognising a gender with the gratitude and power which we deserve.

Have you come to gradually see a similar sort of growing up within your practice? Where is this being reflected through the body of work you've produced for the exhibition?

Of course, there is an evolution. Maybe in my wisdom to concentrate a lot of elements I want to say in one object. I think before I needed more objects to say what I want. Now, I can summarise, in a technical or aesthetic way. Also in my evolution, like spiritual consciousness, of course, I have this feeling I control my energies better and understand my spirituality. I feel, also, more enabled to say with my voice, to express myself clearly with a greater sense of empowerment. I think it's bigger than before.



Before our conversation, when I was learning more about you through your work, I read you try to realise a fairly intergenerational and fictitious family dynamic. This largely entails you assembling and superimposing photographic portraits of Black families you come across at flea markets before adding rubbish found in the street and locks of hair. How does your piece for *Femmes* also go back to this? I think, out of everything I've come across, particularly around the discussions of your practice, I'm most curious about the use of hair as an artistic supplementation, particularly as you use artificial hair similar to that styled in afro extensions.

I think this speaks to my connection with the United States. Through this archive of the flea market, it's possible to find a portrait of women. But, only in the US. If I do that in Europe it doesn't exist. Even in Brooklyn, because I do this there usually, it's one day in the flea market which is used to look for old photos, to find five or six portraits of women. The percentage is so low, it took a lot of time, but it was also a way to speak about my connection and my international practice, in a way, in this context of the exhibition. It's also this power of the representation of the Black woman, so, for me, it was a nice way to create this mirror in the context of *Femmes*. It made sense for me to think about a series of paintings for the exhibition. There's also an aesthetic legacy from an artist with collage, assembling, scrapbooking, it's American, not European, but it's really from this idea of transatlantic connection. That was my logic.

For the inclusion of artificial hair, it's also about something trivial. First of all, I like to add the layers to give a distance because, most of the time, daily trivial objects or signs are like traces of existences. The hair is the DNA of each person, but in this case, it is also artificial hair which we use to braid. I braid for a lot of people and I have a lot of braids, sometimes. All the time, there's this mound of hair on the floor and you have to take care after because it's everywhere. There's something which is really trivial like that, but it's also a small memory of a moment that belongs to my existence as a Black woman. It's a translation that I try to do in my paintings with this piece of hair.

There are a lot of strands there, particularly from a contextual standpoint.

I've read about the history of braids, and there are a lot of layers as well. This connection between the politics and intimacy of hair is something which interests me, particularly this strong link between daily intimate life and politics.

If you look at society's preoccupation with this largely enigmatic figure, do you see this exhibition as being an intervention designed to occupy something which is absent or a reiteration of that which has always been present? I've read, for instance, that some of its artists have looked to "explore the representation of Black bodies, individual identities and their evolving typologies" whilst others are "engaging history, memory and the layered narratives intertwined within visual records."

It's a really hardcore question! I think in this context, there's something firstly mainstream, there's something about pop culture because we are in that, so someone, everyone is in this space. Personally in my practice, I use elements from subculture, pop-culture, mainstream, mixed with an intelligent archive. It's a way for me to cross between roads of different worlds that we need to cross to change destiny. This world and the world of pop-culture, for me, make sense now because they've also opened new worlds, new aesthetics and new ways to think, to understand. One world will feed the others. In this exhibition, there's an intention to consider what's happening right now, it's like a proof of existence.



Reflecting upon your individual practice for the moment, how do you see it as joining in with this artistic chorus and are there certain occasions, when you've looked to go beyond it and reach your crescendo? Are there women in your life who've especially catalysed this, particularly those who you have also encountered over the course of *Femmes*?

Of course, my mother was the first woman that catalysed a lot of things within my life and throughout a lot of things in my work, through restoring, through painting, through motherhood and the relationship to this femme, this woman. The meeting with Lorna Simpson when I worked on the Dior show two years ago was really important for me because I realised I'm meeting this woman, this femme, this figure in the art world that I can be in connection with or influenced by. It was really deep.

**How do you imagine this femme, where is she reflected in your work?
Is there an intersection between how you imagine her through art and
how you imagine her through life?**

I did a lot of representations of Madonna, Black Madonna, it's this representation, similar to a Venus, between a creative figure, magical powerful with the power of everything not only when it concerns giving birth, but giving birth to everything around her.

**Going back to the family dynamic I referenced a couple questions ago,
where do you see that here?**

Sadly I didn't have time to go to the exhibition as I am a resident in Venice. I will go at the end of the exhibition. I saw some photos but it's not enough to respond to this question.



Talk me through your contribution to *Femmes*, do you regard it as being individual or universal, particularly as the exhibition itself commits to concentrating on the “multifaceted nature of Black womanhood.”

For me, it's both personal and communal. My work begins as something really intimate, really private, but it's become translated into something universal. Which I, through my spirituality and through my beliefs, also hope to become. Something more.

There's also a presence of various pop-cultural elements here, given it's being “deeply rooted in both Pharell and Perrotin's DNA.” With this being said, I'm also intrigued by the way in which you believe the relationship between Black womanhood and popular culture to be, is it complementary or contradictory?

I think this is a really good question because I think the patriarchal references are based on this elitist aesthetic and visual aesthetic. It's also a way to find a place to re-appropriate something so I think it's contradictory. But, also for me, popular culture is really important to society, it's a place where Black women can express themselves. It's the only place where we were allowed to have visibility, so it's also not contradictory in this sense. I think we deserve a place everywhere and that's why I like to mix both because I think the new purpose is to be everywhere, not only in popular culture.

This exhibition looks at art, Black culture and womanhood. How do you believe art shapes our understanding of popular culture and Black womanhood, whether through visual or literary means?

Art is the accessibility to this elitist aesthetic, art can welcome everything but it's also welcomed in this elitist and patriarchal world. So, I think art, it's this really important bridge to give space for Black women.











