

CANADIANART



Studio of Sophie La Rosière. Photo: Iris Häussler.

FEATURE

Iris Häussler: The Mask Under the Face

By Gérard Audinet

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The birth of progressive modern art and the decline of academicism, with its vaunted technical skill, opened a new aesthetic territory. It also uncovered deep fractures in the general conception of “the artist,” who could no longer be reduced to a person with a mastery of professional skill. Even being professional could be suspect. It could be seen as an indication of a profound lack of sincerity and truthfulness—a deficit in something essential that coincided with neither the knowledge nor the social position of the artist. Art Brut, a term introduced by the artist Jean Dubuffet to refer to art made outside of the art world, plunged headlong into this fracture.

As I speak with artist Iris Häussler and curator Catherine Sicot about Häussler’s *Sophie La Rosière* project in my office at the Maisons de Victor Hugo, the Place des Vosges—seen through the windows with its

architectural ensemble of *hôtels particuliers*, unified but all differing in detail—I am yet even more aware of this disappearance of a supposed golden age of classicism in which individuality could flourish within a closed system of knowledge and rules.

In the wide-open system of contemporary art, the fractures in an artist's identity are all the more apparent. The fame that could make a painter the equal of a Renaissance prince, or a present-day finance "genius," seems to have hidden the fact that artists would always identify themselves in relation to something else. What seems most important—more important, of course, than technical mastery—would always come from somewhere else: ancient personifications of divine inspiration, or traditional definitions of genius that decentre artists from their normal, disciplined individuality.



Sophie La Rosière *Untitled* n.d. Oil on salvaged wood, 54 cm x 1.25 m x 2.5 cm. Courtesy Iris Häussler.

Various strategies in modern and contemporary art have attempted to re-establish this otherness or alterity, which is considered essential to the validity of artists and their work: abstraction's geometry and its impersonal touch, technological objectivity, predefined experimental procedures, concepts and sociological stances. Fiction cuts straight to the heart of the problem. Here, with Häussler and her creation, the painter Sophie, the artist erases herself completely beneath an invented identity, intent on making this necessary alterity speak.

There are some precedents for approaching the problem differently that are nonetheless related. Undoubtedly the most significant of these were the spirit seances, with their written and graphic productions, that emerged in the mid-19th century, the purposes of which were not necessarily artistic but which came to be recognized in that way. Interestingly, the term used to designate the materials of the institutional artist also defines the person who takes the role of artist in a seance—the medium—who is but the intermediary for others to express themselves. What mediums experience during a seance is so intense that they are compelled to give body to this "other" who speaks or draws through them.

This excessive alterity, unacceptable in rationalist thought, was quickly reincorporated into the individual in the form of an interior otherness—that of the unconscious—which Surrealism would activate through automatism. The inclusion of spirit art in the Art Brut movement allowed for the concept of "it is not me, it is the other" to be read as a strategic detour that permitted someone who, socially, had no right to art—women and those of modest means—to gain access without training or technical skill. "Having never learned" was the formula that guaranteed the truth of the phenomenon.

The *Sophie La Rosière* project recovers the truth that is at the heart of fiction through refinement and intensification. The problematic identity of the artist is fragmented in a game of hide-and-seek: Häussler hides behind Sophie, an invented character from the turn of the century in whose name she paints, and Sophie perhaps hides a third woman—a mysterious live-in maid, who is perhaps a lover and an artistic collaborator—and the secluded suburb conceals their existence. The fact that Sophie is a contemporary of Simone de Beauvoir who paints like the Naïve artist Séraphine de Senlis adds biographical uncertainty to her place in history. Finally, the act of painting itself is an obscuring device, as subjects and styles are hidden layer upon layer and each of La Rosière's paintings is concealed beneath another.

This insistent repainting that lies at the core of the *Sophie La Rosière* project points to another crucial issue. Recalling Francis Picabia and his own increasingly systematic habit of painting over his own paintings, I have come to feel that painting was no longer possible other than by self-destruction. The problematic identity in the person of the artist duplicates the problematic identity in the act of painting and the materiality that is repeatedly covered over and invents its alterity in overlapping underlayers. Nothing is possible without the constructive destruction of identity, whether it be the artist's in the fiction or the painting in its overlapping layers.



Sophie La Rosière *Untitled* n.d. Oil on salvaged wood, 94 x 30 x 2 cm. Courtesy Iris Häussler.

Like a spirit painter, Häussler “paints without ever having learned.” Painting becomes possible for her only when mediated through the identity of another. But who—or what—within this fiction, this modification, decides what she paints or how she paints it? What unconscious—what repressed—what deceased—entity returns here under the ruse of a detour through another, and of a painting that reveals itself by hiding? The trap Häussler sets is very complex, and is all the more effective for ensnaring us in a net of pleasure—that of history and painting, and of bodily sensuality which goes as far as the exhaustion of the flesh and the

withering of flowers. Faced with the revelation of the fiction that has been set up, this pleasure will make the public's regret of its revelation all the more violent. Let the public console itself and exchange this truth for another. It is no less true that it is *Sophie La Rosière* who has invented Iris Häussler.

Gérard Audinet is director of the Maisons de Victor Hugo, Paris/Guernesey. The Sophie La Rosière project is currently in development, and will take place in Paris and its surrounding area. The project is the result of a curatorial collaboration with Catherine Sicot and Elegoa Cultural Productions.

This is an article from the Winter 2014 issue of Canadian Art, on newsstands until March 14. See our Winter 2014 tablet edition for a related artist project by Iris Häussler.

- See more at: <http://www.canadianart.ca/features/2014/01/10/irish-hassler-sophie-la-rosiere/#sthash.omKwehw8.dpuf>