

Some notes prompted by ‘Te Kust En Te Keur’, Mu.ZEE, Ostend, 2012

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1.

At night, entrance and windows illuminated in shades of luminescence from white to gold to ivory, the foreground interior hollowed out by swathes, diagonals and caverns of soft shadow, augmented by the stretched and rippled folds of luxuriously theatrical drapes – the imposing frontage of the elegant building (rectilinear at a glance, the low, elongated checkerboard of the first and second floor windows proposing a form of genteel industrialism) assumes the beguiling air of mystery and enchantment that one might associate with the set for an opera. All appears ready and waiting – relaxed yet alert, resonating an air of benign yet unpredictable magic.

The colors are simultaneously soft, romantic, commercial, fresh and crisp. The temper of this static theatre is at once steeped in the archaism of mid-twentieth century gentility, and a Pop Age timelessness – a make-believe era that appears to combine the Mod retail engineering of early boutiques with the retro-charm of reprised Jean Cocteau with a line thrown back to the 1980s by way of the tempo of a film by Eric Rohmer and a postmodern mix-up of pop cult styling... The artwork made in the

medium of commercial and technical design and artisanal production, in the lineage of Richard Hamilton’s ‘Self-Portrait’ assemblage and photo-shoot, for ‘Living Arts’ magazine back in 1962...

So what do you get at Te Kust En Te Keur? An evening of fun in the metropolis of your dreams; the sensibility of which, in this heady and yet seamless unification of art, fashion, design, graphics, retail-engineering, stage design, typography, intellectual imagination and silver surfing across the cultural archaeology of what a department store might be... is what could be a direct descendant, in terms of aesthetic temper, of the short-lived but meticulously created ‘Flair’ magazine, created by Fleur Cowles in New York in 1950 – due to its lavish production and uncompromising standards of design and materials, it folded a year later. (Thus setting a trend that would be continued in London, nearly thirty years later, by the two issues of ‘Deluxe’ magazine – a publication which caught the moment when Pop art and Art Pop fused with the post-punk zeitgeist.)

‘Flair’ – like the art tableaux comprising Te Kust En Te Keur – was at once supremely elegant, unashamedly elitist in matters relating to sense and sensibility, and committed to reanimating the visual languages of art and culture. It was an entirely modern, aerated, heavyweight with a light touch – and there is Fleur herself, in a photograph, sharing a picnic in a

hotel room with Cary Grant. (An aside: Wikipedia tells us that Fleur Cowles – who lived to be 101 – espoused a very direct form of feminism, which chimes with one of the sensibilities at work in *Te Kust En Te Keur*: “I’ve worked hard, and I’ve made a fortune, and I did it in a man’s world, but always, ruthlessly, and with a kind of cruel insistence, I have tried to keep feminine”)

2:

Figures await the viewer, in various forms and tempers: male and female, eternally, archetypically young and modern, frozen yet seemingly sentient, in attitudes at once quotidian and heroic. Three female mannequins, hands on hips; two gentlemen – perhaps a sales assistant and customer - converse; to one side a woman kneels beside a display of Anchor socks, their shades like a color chart – a seated man to her left; devout teenagers salute what might be a long-haired magi, who holds aloft three rolls of fabric, while behind him, a seated boy and girl converse – the composition of the figures borrowed, it appears, from Jacques-Louis David’s ‘Oath of the Horatii’ (1784), while the atmosphere of the scene seems redolent of two centuries later (what’s the time again?); Laura Croft and Indiana Jones, heroes at last united, faces stern

with determination, explore what appears to be an Egyptian tomb – a dancing girl to one side smiles in a manner more sisterly than seductive towards the viewer...

Who else? What could be a family group, eight figures, men and women, in a domestic interior... northern European on first impression, liberal bourgeois perhaps – their faces impassive but relaxed; it might be either a family occasion, or a commemorative photograph of an academic faculty... They seem to look down on the viewer from their place on the second floor, serious and patient...

Monolithic, her body divided down the three floors of the building, bending at the waist, her head inclined and the sheen of her long hair hanging vertically, a young woman coolly regards us. She appears sophisticated and entirely at ease with herself... With her left hand between her thighs, she delicately holds a small cup between two fingers, from which flows menstrual blood like a psychedelic Yellow Brick Road... And then there are softly romantic hangings, laced like ship's sails, depicting in outline and gentle color women and shoes and perfume and flowers – as evocative of time and memory and elegance as Andy Warhol's collection of antique scent bottles...

And then there's always more.

3:

The artists who created *Te Kust En Te Keur* have conveyed the manner in which a department store, as a modernist invention - see the world of Mrs Dalloway, or Zola's 'Au Bonheur des Dames' or *Ealing Comedy*, or E. M. Forster's muddle-beleaguered middle class ladies, or Norman Collins's 'Bond Street Story' - might comprise a confluence of ceremonial domestic interior and theatre set, art and artifice, enchantment and commerce. Political theorists can also comment upon the zone; and yet suppose the design of a cosmetics counter might be used as a medium for a work of art: pristine, vivacious, erotic, sleek, glittering and thin... And like the seaside ballroom, the department store might comprise a people's palace, as well as a magical realm of dreams that money can buy.

*Te Kust En Te Keur* is thus an artwork in the medium of a department store: a place where the Hamiltonian recognition of technical and artisanal skills sits well with the dialogue between personal ideals and personal ideologies. Quotidian, glamorous, beguiling, at ease, open handed, welcoming, modern and, of necessity, enchanted.