

ARTNEWS

LOVE POTIONS: ART AND THE HEART

By Barbara Pollack | February 13, 2013 7:00 AM

From Frank Sinatra to the Beatles to Taylor Swift—just turn on the radio and you can hear anthem upon anthem to love. But wander into a contemporary art museum, and such evidence of passion is, more often, nowhere in sight. Romantic love has been a subject of art throughout time—François Boucher in the Enlightenment, Pierre-Auguste Renoir and Auguste Rodin in the 19th century, and Roy Lichtenstein in the 20th—but nowadays most artists are far too cool and ironic or otherwise engaged to wear their hearts on their sleeves. Despite this overall reluctance, there are more than a few contemporary artists who tell great love stories, even some who confess to a broken heart.

Late last year, “[The Progress of Love](#)” exhibition opened at three institutions simultaneously: the [Menil Collection](#) in Houston, the [Pulitzer Foundation for the Arts](#) in Saint Louis, and the [Centre for Contemporary Art](#), Lagos. The show pairs several American and European artists with many more from Africa, giving a cross-cultural perspective on the topic of courtship. Another show, “[This Will Have Been: Art, Love & Politics in the 1980s](#),” debuted at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago in February 2012, placing contemporary takes on love and desire into historical context. (This show is currently at the [ICA Boston](#) until March 3.) While none of the artists in these exhibitions will soon be hired by Hallmark to churn out Valentine’s Day cards, they all offer sophisticated approaches to what is undeniably a complex and rich subject.

Take French artist Sophie Calle’s 2007 tour de force, *Take Care of Yourself*, now on view at the Pulitzer’s presentation of “The Progress of Love.” Calle’s initial inspiration came from an e-mail sent to her by a boyfriend intent on breaking up with her. It ended with the words, “I would have liked things to have turned out differently. Take care of yourself.” In order to do just that, Calle sent the letter to 107 women from different professions and backgrounds—a psychiatrist, an author, a rifle shooter, a family mediator, a lawyer, even a parrot—asking them to interpret the text. The reactions were framed and, in several cases, played on



Yinka Shonibare, *The Swing (after Fragonard)*, 2001, appears in the exhibition “The Progress of Love,” examining how different cultures experience and express love. ©2012 YINKA SHONIBARE/COURTESY THE ARTIST AND TATE COLLECTION, LONDON

monitors, positioned beside the contributors' portraits and filling an entire gallery. The repetition of the original letter, played over and over again, did indeed take the sting out of the words, rendering them absurd or at least open to many interpretations. When asked how she would interpret the piece, Calle replied by e-mail:

I guess this work is about love (we could also say that, in a way, the man who sent me the break-up mail became my muse), and interpretations (it was my way of answering a letter I didn't really understand through the accumulation of possible interpretations) and therapy (I became too busy to cry and more and more attracted to the project and less and less to the man) and distance (a play with feelings), etc. . . . Who knows? but I try not to step aside and say what my work is about. I let others do that part of the job.

Yet, it is undeniable that Calle created a work that many could relate to on an intimate level, flashing back to their own heartbreaks and losses. But Calle insists, "It is not intimate, it is banal," she writes. "It is just one among millions of letters or mails or SMS or phone calls to say, 'I don't love you anymore,' that people send and receive every day in the world."

British artist Tracey Emin, who had a 2011 retrospective, titled "Love Is What You Want," at London's Hayward Gallery, is another artist who delves into her personal life to explore the themes of heartbreak, loss, and survival. In one of her most infamous works, *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963–1995*, included in the 1997 "Sensation" exhibition in London, she embroidered inside a large blue tent the name of every person with whom she'd shared a bed since childhood. Often considered a declaration of promiscuity, the installation (which included the names of her brothers, her relatives, and even the twin fetuses she had aborted) is more accurately a celebration of intimacy. In more recent works, such as her "Illuminated Valentines," neon signs bear her unmistakable handwriting and such proclamations as "When I hold you I hold your heart," "And I Said I Love you," and "I Can't Believe How much You Loved Me."

"Does Tracey tell love stories? It depends on how you define a love story," says Hayward Gallery director Ralph Rugoff. "She uses a more confessional, stylistic voice at times, rather than something like telling a whole story. It's more immediate than that." But as Rugoff explains, her diaristic tone often leads viewers to identify with her troubles. "Everyone can project and fill in the details from their own experiences, which may create a shadow of a narrative," Rugoff says.

Why don't more contemporary artists address the issue of love as forthrightly as Calle and Emin do? "It's been a taboo in art to be autobiographical, as opposed to literature where people regularly make fiction out of their lives," Rugoff explains. "I think talking about your own life somehow troubles the imperfect point of view that art should somehow transcend everyday existence and be something more generalized and abstract."

Certainly these works are a far cry from Picasso's tender portrait *The Lovers* (1923), depicting in soft pastel tones a couple gently holding each other. Contemporary depictions of love are actually closer to René Magritte's *Lovers* (1928), showing a man and a woman kissing, their heads shrouded in cloths. One of the most compelling romantic stories is that created by the South African artist William Kentridge, whose animation *Felix in Exile* (1994) tells the tale of a heartless industrialist, his neglected wife, and her poet lover (who bears a strong resemblance to the artist) in a passionate, irresolvable love triangle. But this film is really about the demise of apartheid in South Africa as much as it is about love. Likewise, Chinese artist Yang

Fudong highlighted the sense of alienation and the absence of secure love relations among a group of young Shanghai men and women in his 2003 video masterpiece, *Seven Intellectuals in a Bamboo Forest*.

According to Helen Molesworth, chief curator at ICA Boston, who organized “This Will Have Been,” a shift took place in the 1980s, which changed the notions of love and desire for a new generation of artists. “The ‘80s is the era when a generation of people who grew up with television come of age,” she says, adding, “This is a new social instrument which is basically a machine that produces desire, so there is a new kind of desire that has to be explored.” Looking at artists ranging from Cindy Sherman to Felix Gonzalez-Torres, we can see that several factors, including the impact of feminism on intimate relations and the rise of gay identity politics, contributed to changing the dynamics of love and desire.

Gonzalez-Torres’s *Untitled (Perfect Lovers)*, 1991, consists of a pair of inexpensive, plain-faced wall clocks, ticking away side by side. The instructions for installation insist that the two be set at exactly the same time, but because of their imprecise mechanisms, it is only a short time before one of the clocks falls a second or two behind the other. “The beauty of the piece is that it is a very perfect image of what a couple is, trying to stay on the same page but never actually being able to,” says Molesworth, who also views this as a metaphor for the relationship between art historian and art object. Rather than stating a single authoritative opinion, the pair must be open to different narratives “with the ability to gently be in and out of time with one another.”

“When I made this piece, I really thought I was making a work for an audience that wasn’t even born yet,” says Brooklyn artist Patricia Cronin, “but within ten years, we were able to marry in New York State, which is unbelievable.” Her *Memorial to a Marriage*, a depiction of two women gently cradling each other in bed, was first made in marble in 2000 and then translated into bronze and sited in Woodlawn Cemetery at the burial plot of the artist and her then-partner, now wife, Deborah Kass. Cronin took her inspiration for the work from several historic artworks, including *Sleeping Children* (1859) by 19th-century sculptor William Henry Rinehart and Courbet’s painting *The Sleepers* (1866), which depicts two women in what is easy to imagine as a postcoital embrace. “When I originally called it a *Memorial to a Marriage*, it was a memorial, but we were still alive, to a marriage we couldn’t have,” says Cronin, who adds that “the political reality is catching up and hopefully will go past the political statement of the piece, so when we actually do die, it will be an actual memorial to an actual marriage.”

Love, American Style (2012), by New York sculptor Lisa Hoke, shows that another take on desire, rooted in the 1980s, is alive and well today: the awareness that love is often used as a tool for marketing, and desire is often best expressed through shopping. For this work, Hoke recycled the paper packaging from a plethora of household goods—shoe boxes, Crest toothpaste, Oreo cookies, Good & Plenty candy, Tide detergent—and meticulously fashioned them into a monumental wall frieze, stretching 40 feet in length and 16 feet in height. “I was horrified after 9/11 when Mayor Giuliani said if you love New York, go out and shop—the idea that if you love something, you have to show it by spending money,” says Hoke. But she admits she suffers the same syndrome. “One of the things that happened when I started collecting all of this stuff is that I felt that same compulsion, the heady feeling from that packaging. It’s so beautiful and sexy.”

Certainly, another aspect of contemporary life that plays into the idea of love and the way it is enacted in everyday life is globalization. Many of the artists in “The Progress of Love”—an exhibition that takes its name

from the famous 18th-century series by Fragonard that decorated the chateau of Madame du Barry, the mistress of Louis XV—question the very notion that love is universal, or that it is expressed the same way throughout the world. “How Do Africans Kiss?” is the first in an series of progressively intimate prompts given to subjects in *Eaten By The Heart*, a video piece by British-Nigerian filmmaker Zina Saro-Wiwa, asking a question whose answer seems self-evident—Of course, all people kiss, don’t they? The results were often surprising. As Saro-Wiwa comments, “I wonder how the impact of how we choreograph and culturally organize the performance of love impacts what we feel inside and who we become.”

In many ways, the trilateral exhibition, a collaboration among three institutions, emerged from Menil Collection curator Kristina Van Dyke’s studies about arranged marriage in Mali. It prompted a discussion between her and her African colleagues, who seemed equally curious about the details of courtship in the United States. One of the key works in the show is *The Swing (after Fragonard)*, 2001, a re-creation by British-Nigerian artist Yinka Shonibare of the French artist’s highly erotic painting. But in Shonibare’s sculptural installation, the woman on the swing is headless and her dress is made from Dutch wax fabrics created in the Netherlands but often mistaken for authentic African textiles.

“It was his piece that showed me how notions of love in Africa and the West are highly contingent and always have been,” says Van Dyke, who explains that Fragonard was one of the first artists to explore the development of a leisure class with the time and resources, much of it provided by trade with Africa and by African slaves, to experience a romantic notion of love. “It shows how we don’t start with a clean slate,” says Van Dyke, who adds, “We inherit ideas of loss and of love, and of what the narrative of love looks like and what being in love looks like. Our ways come out of the past, and we can rework it, but there is no way of getting out of it.”