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*Milly Thompson's Deep Voguing at Freehouse*

Text by Christabel Stewart; photographs by Damian Griffiths

Milly Thompson has professed an admiration for the work of American feminist artist Martha Rosler. In a significant engagement with the latter's work, Thompson has exhibited, published the script of and linked through her website to *Martha Rosler Reads Vogue*. In this live performance from 1981 for public-access cable television, Rosler deconstructs the messages and advertisements found in the magazine and investigates how socioeconomic realities and political ideologies dominate ordinary life. It's an exceptional and prescient work from the artist known for constructing incisive social and political analyses of the myths and realities of contemporary culture. Thompson included it as part of "Evasion" (2012), an exhibition with contributions from Alison Jones, Josephine Meckseper and Nicole Wermers, as well as Thompson and Rosler. The script for Rosler's video was included in the accompanying journal *VUOTO*, a publication mirroring the luxury magazine, being both a collection of critical artworks and high-end self-objectification. With an editor's letter by Nina Power, it considers the fields of fashion-art and media, "where opposition nestles in co-dependency".

A choice quote from Rosler's piece: "*Vogue* is: voyeurism, mystification, the skin of luxury. The whiff of decadence, the allure of narcissism. The old you don't want to be anymore becoming the new you that you want to be. The weak face covered over by the strong face. It is submission. The hunt, drama, animalism. It is the triumph of and the power of the phallus to transform. It is self as object as sculpture as creation. It is submissiveness in the guise of which power over men, over women, over career, over private worlds. What is *Vogue*? It is luxury, allure, mystery, romance, excitement, love, splendour. It is fashion, it is clothes, diet, exercise, accessories, it is loving and losing, loving and winning, it is career, it is travel, it is knowing how and knowing who and knowing when."

For her current, albeit lockdown-interrupted, solo exhibition – simply titled "4 New Paintings" – at Freehouse, London, Thompson is presenting, among others, a new painting entitled *Deep Voguing*. The complex composition of this large-scale work depicts a female body rendered in shades of black and electric blue, on a patterned, abstracted background. The figure is almost contorted into the space of the landscape canvas. She is adorned with several accessories: a neck chain, bracelet and ring, each quite chunky and echoing the complex manipulations of the body. Voguing itself is a style of dance that arose in African American and Latino gay and trans cultures in America from the early 1960s to the 1980s: demonstrations that specifically performed aspects of identity such as race, gender and sexuality, showing them as fluid and intersecting. The drag competitions (most notably documented in *Paris Is Burning* from 1990) that began during this time eventually shifted from elaborate pageantry to vogue dance battles. Inspired by the poses of models from *Vogue* magazine, voguing is characterised by striking a series of positions as if one is modelling for a shoot. Arm and leg movements are angular, linear, rigid, and move swiftly from one static position to another. The practice continues today in a "New Way" that combines these rigid movements with limb contortions at the joints and hand

and wrist illusions. It can also be described as a modified form of mime in which imaginary geometric shapes, such as a box, are introduced during motion and move progressively around the dancer's body to display their dexterity and memory, therefore involving incredible flexibility. Thompson's figure, itself painted into an eccentric and pointedly awkward pose, can be looked at through this lens. The artist's "4 New Paintings" continues – or perhaps expands – on a text she wrote in 2010, "I Choose Painting", in which she cautions us to look beyond rhetoric to what is still at stake: "a woman artist's right to decide the manner and means of her own representation". A potent moment in a world embroiled in complex, fractured and damaging identity politics. Thompson has not shied away from the post-menopausal female nude, nor the exploration of women's politics of work and leisure. The accompanying three works, and especially *Temple Creation*, also celebrate form, colour, the repeated motif of the curved form of a peanut, and quotidian still life in a manner that elevates but does not obfuscate that same ordinary life that Rosler alludes to when examining why we should be so taken in by the surface of an alluring, luxurious sexuality. *"4 New Paintings", an exhibition of works by Milly Thompson, is on show at Freehouse until 15th November.*

Credit is a collaboration between Modern Forms, Central Saint Martins and Kingston University.

The project is managed by Modern Forms.