

FIFTY ONE

FINE ART PHOTOGRAPHY

Fifty One celebrates 10 years with Serge Gainsbourg (1928 - 1991)

5th of June – 31st of July 2010

Où est ma petite amie ? Elle est dans mon Rolleiflex.

Where is my girlfriend? She's disappeared into my Rolleiflex.

Serge Gainsbourg (1928-1991) dreamt of becoming a painter and a movie maker. In both cases he managed to produce only a few lasting works: a few canvases demonstrating his talent for colors and four films, the first of which was entitled after one of his most famous songs *Je t'aime moi non plus* and would also become the most acclaimed. Though his films were deemed controversial, none of them achieved great success. Yet, one thing is certain; each shot had been contemplated, imagined, composed, and put into scene by a man with the aesthetically attuned eye of a photographer. When reading the filmic scenarios, one is surprised to discover that Gainsbourg allotted more painstaking attention to the perfection of focal points, the lens, to movements of the camera, than to the psychology of the characters – whom, in any case, mostly resembled himself, the tortured artist.

On his 1964 album “Gainsbourg Confidentiel”, Serge sings about a photograph he describes in *Negative Blues*:

Où est ma petite amie ?

Elle est dans mon Rolleiflex

C'était mon premier reflex

J'aime la photographie

Je revois la petite chérie

Posant pour mon Rolleiflex

Un p'tit machin en lastex

Lui donnait un peu d'esprit

Gainsbourg was thus also a photographer, staging a nude Jane Birkin – sometimes even chained to a radiator, for erotic magazines). Later on in his life he would publish a book in which his last girlfriend appears on the scene: *Bambou et les poupées*, with

her icy eroticism, her dominance - electrifying blue, yet pale as rose. The scene renders a surreal orgy, wherein one can hardly distinguish the human being from the disjointed mannequins.

Gainsbourg's photos were accompanied by text – here is one chosen at random:

Mardi quatorze heures quinze

Premiers symptômes de photophobie. Recherche de clairs-obscur et de contre-jours. Abuse de Bambou comme un légionnaire au Tonkin. Elle pleure jaune et riz blanc. Ma petite princesse de Chine s'enroule dans les spirales du lit, œil et entrejambe en amande. Nice girl. À la visée reflex, je dois reconnaître que la gamine a un cul de Rolls-Royce. Ne lui manque que la plaque minéralogique citron vert de L.A.

Je glisse ma caméra sous le châssis, elle son ongle carmin dans le tuyau d'échappement. Arrêt image.

When it came to his album covers, Gainsbourg was all business. He would only call upon the very best. Photographer Tony Frank, for example, does the cover of “Histoire de Melody Nelson” (with a young Jane Birkin, both wigged and made up, singing to a stuffed Monkey and showing the first signs of her pregnancy); Jean d'Hugues does the cover of “Vu de l'extérieur” (where the face of Serge is surrounded by Chimpanzees, Orang Outangs and Baboons); Lord Snowdon doing the cover for “Aux armes et cetera”; and William Klein doing “Love On The Beat”. Gainsbourg he had found himself hideously ugly as a youth, to the near point of developing a painful complex, which is why he was the only one who could manage his image. Finding a balance between ugliness and fascination, Gainsbourg developed a Dandy image that would become his signature.

All this, a culmination of reasons for which Roger Szmulewicz, longstanding admirer of Gainsbourg's oeuvre, has decided to treat us to an exhibition (celebrating the 10 years of Gallery Fifty One's existence) which offers a mélange of portraits, as well as rare and eccentric images by artists such as William Klein, JL Sieff, Tony Frank, Helmut Newton, Pierre Terrasson, Claude Gassian, Guy Albrecht , Patrick de Spiegelare, Bert Stern , Xavier Martin, and Alain Trelu amongst others. In addition to the photographs, a collection of cult objects (books, cd's, magazines, etc) will

contribute to the unusual presentation that represents a continuously growing admiration and love for an artist who gained little recognition at the beginning of his career despite the masterpieces he created – songs including “La Javanaise”, “Initials B.B.”, “la Chanson de Prévert” or “Doctor Jeckyll and Mister Hyde”.

Let us admire this exhibition while meditating on these words, through which Serge Gainsbourg, in 1960, clarifies the dark source of his inspiration:

Je suis incapable de faire une chanson optimiste, heureuse, une chanson d'amour. Je ne trouve pas les mots, je n'ai rien à dire du bonheur, je ne sais pas ce que c'est. Il ne s'exprime pas. C'est comme si vous braquiez l'objectif de votre appareil photographique sur un ciel parfaitement bleu. Il n'y aura rien sur la pellicule. Alors que si vous photographiez un ciel d'orage, avec de beaux nuages noirs et gris, ce sera superbe !

Gilles Verlant