

bettina rheims

NAKED WAR

Exhibition from October 21st to November 25th 2017

Opening on Saturday October 21st, from 3pm



Bettina Rheims, *Sarah Constantin, Délivrez nous du Mâle*, May 2017, Paris, 2017

Colour photograph, 145 x 108 cm.

© Bettina Rheims. Courtesy Galerie Xippas

The Xippas gallery is delighted to present Bettina Rheims' latest photographic project, "Naked War". Carried out in 2017 in collaboration with the writer and novelist Serge Bramly, it is the result of the meeting between the photographer and the Femen activists.

The portraits of the Femen extend the research on the construction and representation of femininity which the artist has been leading for over 35 years, and which has taken a clearly political turn since her series "Détenues" (2014)¹. In this context, Bettina Rheims looks towards the feminist movement, where she finds affinities intrinsic to her work.

Femen is an international women's movement which began in 2008 in Ukraine. Femen's actions are part of the "third wave of feminism", after the Suffragettes in the 19th century and the movements in the 1970s. More radical, and more physically involved, the Femen reappropriate performance codes by acting in the public sphere. Displaying slogans on their naked torsos, which become a privileged space for statements, they invented "political nudity" as a tool for raising awareness.

By stripping naked, these women demonstrate that the body remains the last and only means of resisting oppression, and the reactions to the Femen's demands have proven that it is a highly powerful means. These reactions, ranging from accusations of public indecency to physical aggression, reveal the violence inherent in the current socio-political system.

¹ Encouraged by M. Robert Badinter and with the support of the penitentiary administration, Bettina Rheims photographed over 60 female detainees between September and November 2014.

Through the staging, but also through the specific codes of the images, Bettina Rheims gives another visibility to the Femen's engagement and transposes the issues of feminist activism to the field of contemporary art.

Photographed against a neutral background, these fighting bodies are taken out of their public environment and, facing the spectator, address themselves directly to them. By means of photography, Bettina Rheims highlights the performative side of Femen activism and creates a work of which the artist and the activists are the co-authors. Giving a strong presence to the non-ideal and sometimes unconventional female body, turned into the medium of a political message, corporeality, always present in Bettina Rheims' work, unveils another dimension - that of engagement and power.

With embodied but non-erotic femininity, the Femen use their nudity as a means of communication which shakes up the modes of expression of feminist movements. Bettina Rheims uses the codes of femininity adopted by the Femen to call into question the social and cultural power struggles where women are still attributed precise roles. Rediscovering one's feminine body, not as an object of desire, but as an active subject and political actor: such is the Femen's commitment transcribed by Bettina Rheims.

By broaching the question of the feminine body and the image of nudity as a political space and tool, Bettina Rheims brings to light the issues of Femen engagement and offers a renewed vision of the feminine portrait as "political nudes".

From her series on the strippers of Pigalle (1980) which marked the beginning of her career, to her work on gender in "Gender Studies" (2011), Bettina Rheims' photography shakes up traditional themes and iconography. One of the major series, "Chambre Close" (1990-1992) - the first in colour - marked the beginning of her collaboration with the novelist Serge Bramly.

A number of institutions have held retrospective exhibitions of her work: the Kunsthal, Rotterdam and the Moscow House of Photography, Moscow (2008), the C/O in Berlin and the FORMA in Milan (2008), the Maison Européenne de la Photographie in Paris and the Fotografiska Museet in Stockholm (2016).

A retrospective book which brings together more than 500 photographs taken over the course of her 35 year career was published by Taschen Editions in 2016.

In 1995, Bettina Rheims took the official portrait of the President of the Republic, Jacques Chirac. He awarded her with the ensign of Officer of the Legion of Honour for her work in 2007.

GALERIE XIPPAS PARIS

108 rue Vieille du Temple 75003 Paris

www.xippas.com

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PRESS CONTACT

Olga Ogorodova

press@xippas.com

+33 1 40 27 05 55