

Frankie Kobain

The Berlin artist *Frankie Kobain* focuses in her work on the representation of gender; she not only addresses the way in which the different sexes are perceived, but above all the associations made by the viewer.

In order to emphasise the inflexibility of our perceptions of gender, *Kobain* draws on male icons from art and cultural history. Using herself as a model, she stages herself in the role of these icons as true to the original as possible, transforming the subject from male into female.

However, she does not simply exchange a man with a woman but takes the play with gender identities a step further. The questions frequently asked when viewing a work of art are no longer significant: In what way does is the work a representation of the difference between male and female? Is this difference reflected in the physical or social environment?

Kobain consciously refuses to answer this question. She does not merely identify with the male gender, which would conform to the logic of the dyad but aspires rather to the personification of an androgynous, undefined gender identity.

In the silk screens **I shot the sheriff / silver, I shot the sheriff / color I** and **I shot the sheriff / sepia** *Kobain* slips into the role of Elvis from Andy Warhol's Double Elvis from 1963. She presents herself in male poses with attributes that immediately trigger associations with male cultural history. Only the head of the model causes us to question whether the model is male or female.

In the photograph **Wheels**, *Kobain* draws an analogy to Fred with Tires by Herb Ritts. We associate the pose, facial expression and clothing, but also the surroundings and the occupation, with a man. However, the open shirt reveals the breasts and the viewer is no longer able to categorise the model into one a fixed gender category.

The digital prints **Eight and Nine** are a reference to the work of the same name by Gilbert & George. While Gilbert & George portray themselves in the midst of personal ads taken from gay magazines, *Kobain* shows herself with her lover surrounded by lesbian personal ads. In addition to the almost derisively exaggerated self-portrait, *Kobain* points to the conspicuous imbalance between the public acceptance of gay themes and lesbian themes in art. While male artists dealing with homosexual issues have gained a great deal of positive attention from the public for some time now, the same can hardly be said of women.

Tucking und Packing is a large, two-part silk screen, which uses abstract lines to show the technique of taping down the penis to create a vagina as well as the act of stuffing one's under-pants with something resembling a penis. The fact that these techniques are portrayed almost like something taken from an instruction manual emphasise the possibility of temporarily assuming the other gender, thus questioning the categorisation of gender identity based on the primary biological sexual characteristics alone.

Frankie Kobain's themes are consistent throughout her work. The artist takes care to imitate the famous role models as precisely as possible, in order to expose the influence of the male-dominated European and American cultural history. In doing so, she uses the same medium as that used for the role model, in order to leave the viewer in no doubt about the direction in which our associations are to be guided. Employing exaggeration and irony, she stretches the boundaries between male and female to such an extent that it is no longer possible to clearly differentiate between the two.

However, also in the works that do not contain a role model, *Kobain* draws our attention to the fact that gender identity can never be defined clearly and simply and must by no means correspond to the gender roles as defined by our society.