



SF

SYLVIE FLEURY

*BY ANNA SANSOM*

Sylvie Fleury has created a phantasmagoric playground through her work. There are the neon signs declaring “Be Amazing!” “Yes to All” “Bigger! Better! Faster!” and “High Heels on the Moon.” The bronze designer handbags, the display cabinets of shoes, the shiny phallic rockets and spaceships, the smashed cars painted in nail polish colors, the lustrous giant mushrooms, the *Vogue* posters, the furry Mondrians, the aura-capturing photographs . . . Witty and ironic, bright and flashy, her work transposes consumer culture and the worlds of luxury and fashion, drawing on advertising slogans and the status accorded to beauty and glamour. Fleury, who was born in 1961 and is based in Geneva, defies categorization. She tells *Whitewall* how she’d like to see herself as Sylvie Fleury Unlimited.

**WHITEWALL:** *In an interview in 2001, you said, “The Planet, or this Spaceship Earth to refer to Bucky Fuller’s primal vehicle theory, needs a lift.” Do you think that there should be an uplifting quality to art? Do you seek a lift through your work?*

**SYLVIE FLEURY:** Yes, I do get lifted by my work in some way, but at the same time I get grounded because it’s never one way or the other. It’s the whole question of the dual process — lifting me up at the same time as grounding me. Because every time you establish a new direction, or add a new piece or a sculpture to your oeuvre, you are somehow giving more weight to a different type of understanding. Everything you do is re-questioning what you have done before and what you do afterward. There’s always a bit of a contradiction in this phenomenon, and it’s not explainable, unfortunately.

**WW:** *You became known in the early 1990s by dropping luxury-*

artwork himself that could have come from inside my head almost. It’s like a telepathic connection. Buddhism says that everything is interlinked and that if you can connect to certain things, then you get linked to other things. I’m not sure; I’m still trying!

**WW:** *Easy Spirit sounds like one of the expressions that you might use yourself.*

**SF:** Yes, I love good names. Like “Yes to All,” which appears on some of my works.

**WW:** *This could be interpreted as being about the notion of total acceptance.*

**SF:** It could mean that, but, again, I don’t like giving explanations. A word is interesting to transfer into art if there are many interpretations, but if it only means one thing, then I don’t want to use it. The idea behind “Yes to All” came from how on Microsoft’s computer a window popped up asking me to say, “Yes to All.” I read that sentence, which probably millions of people read all over the world every day, and thought of using it in a larger way. It could well be a sentence of total acceptance and a Buddhist monk would use it like that, and in that sense it would deal with metaphorical ideas. My work is just a support to let people’s thoughts wander wherever they want. But when a neon of “Yes to All” was put up on the roof of a building in Geneva four years ago, the church didn’t like it and thought it was disrespectful. There’s a huge contradiction in my work and nothing is swept up by a simple answer. I really believe that everything is much more complex than it seems, but also much more simple than it seems — it’s just a metaphor for what life is, in a way. When you look

“MY WORK IS JUST A SUPPORT TO LET PEOPLE’S THOUGHTS WANDER WHEREVER THEY WANT. . . . THERE’S A HUGE CONTRADICTION IN MY WORK AND NOTHING IS SWEEPED UP BY A SIMPLE ANSWER”

*branded “Shopping Bags” into galleries. Transposing luxury and fashion has remained a constant subject in your work, and three years ago you made a huge version of Chanel’s “2.55” bag for Chanel’s Mobile Art Pavilion designed by Zaha Hadid. What does using handbags mean to you?*

**SF:** In my work, I try to talk about whatever is inside and outside. The idea of the handbag as a container is a metaphorical way of talking about this, and I play with this in my proposition. There are people who just see a handbag, others who see it as a fashion statement, and others who see inner meanings. That’s what’s interesting about it and why I don’t like giving explanations about my work. Everyone can get it at any level they want — there’s no good or bad level; it could be compared to a level of consciousness. When I shoot a handbag, destroying it with a Kalashnikov, maybe somebody sees that I am destroying a symbol of luxury or making a Marxist gesture. But an Indian guru would say that I am destroying something of the ego that should be developed in a more spiritual way.

**WW:** *You participated in the traveling exhibition “The Missing Peace: Artists Consider the Dalai Lama,” and asked His Holiness for a personal item so that you could capture its aura through a Kirlian photograph, titled Easy Spirit. And he gave you his pair of brown Dexter shoes.*

**SF:** It’s very funny that he sent me the pair of shoes, as I’ve used a lot of shoes in my own work. He sent them in a green box from a shoe store called Easy Spirit. It was like a message, because I’ve used a lot of texts from ads and logos and slogans, taking the readymade and putting it in a different, quirky way in an exhibition. It’s fantastic and shows that he’s very insightful about the way that people think, because my work is often about what is inside and outside a box. It’s incredible that he thought of an

at something, it can provoke a reaction and I’m more interested in that than in giving a recipe for things.

**WW:** *Several reviews of your exhibition at the MAMCO in Geneva in 2008 referred to your work as “pin-up trash” and “conceptual bimbo.” How did that make you feel? Do you think your work is often misconceived?*

**SF:** The first time I read that, I thought it was funny. But then other journalists used those words because they didn’t have any imagination. It’s a big problem of laziness with journalists who don’t have the capacity of coming up with their own ideas about things. It comes from a slightly disrespectful vision. But I don’t pretend that everyone should think that what I do is wonderful. Respect to the creator and too bad for the others. My work deals a lot with packaging, and people need to put names on it and use it to sell magazines. The minute you’re showing work in a public space, you’re dealing with that and you need to be as Zen as you can about it. People have called my work conceptual because it’s not so easy to define what it’s about. I’m not really happy about

Opposite page, top:  
Sylvie Fleury  
Installation view, Salzburg. Front: *Prada Boots*, 2003. Back: *Yes to All*, 2004.  
Photo by Ulrich Ghezzi.  
Courtesy of Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris/Salzburg.

Opposite page, bottom:  
Portrait by T. Haller.  
Courtesy of Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris/Salzburg.





this. In an ideal, perfect world, I'd prefer to see myself as Sylvie Fleury Unlimited, not postfeministic or fetishistic or neo-Pop or with other art labels attached, which is a very old-fashioned way of looking at art.

**WW:** *You're participating in the group show "Sculpture Now," at Galerie Eva Presenhuber in Zurich in June and July. What will you be showing?*

**SF:** I'm working on a new sculpture of a pair of boots that are standing on a pedestal, which is one meter by one meter by one meter, with strong beams of white light coming out of them and reaching to the five-meter-high ceiling. I bought a pair of beige canvas boots on Net-a-Porter.com — I've forgotten the name of the designer but it wasn't someone well known — and I thought they were perfect because the material looks like an unpainted canvas. The boots will have a small shamanic-inspired symbol painted on the side of the right foot. There'll be two tripods, each holding colored feathers, on either side of the pedestal, slightly behind it. It's explicit to what I was telling you before, about art uplifting me and grounding me at the same time because it's been years since I've been using lights and shoes in my work, and the ideas just come, but I couldn't say what the inspiration is.

**WW:** *Are you working on any pieces for Art Basel?*

**SF:** Yes, I'm working on a new piece for Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac — it's a sculpture of a bronze bag with a painting inside, which is slightly higher than the height of the bag. I just had people searching for a bag that a painting could be put in. I think it's Balenciaga. But in my case, a brand is just like a color. It's like how a painter picks blue or red; it makes the picture look different, but the meaning remains the same, if there is one.

**WW:** *What are your thoughts on how buying art is increasingly regarded by some people as being similar to buying luxury goods? And how the major galleries are opening spaces in numerous cities, in the same way that luxury goods houses are expanding internationally?*

**SF:** Obviously, one of my memories of when I did my first artworks dropping shopping bags into a gallery [starting with Galerie Rivolta in Lausanne in 1991] was about commenting on that. Back then, you didn't have elements that belonged to luxury in exhibitions. My eye was open in the right direction, and I could anticipate this phenomenon but probably not so consciously as one might like to think. A lot of the time, you only realize afterward why you did something. But this became central to my work when I started, and I felt very much that there was this blurring and crossover of different disciplines, like art, fashion, cinema, and music, and how consumerism and these luxury houses were becoming so powerful. So I am with you on that, but this is something we could talk about for hours. We can glamorize the art world, but it's just like any other small world with rules and as many good things and bad things.

**WW:** *Some of your car films have been put up by other people on YouTube. What do you think of the possibilities of using the Internet as a means to communicate on your work?*



**SF:** Everything can happen and it's hard to predict the future clearly, especially dealing with the Internet, because we're only beginning to understand the possibilities that it can develop in so many different ways. But for now, I'd prefer to show my work in other places than on YouTube and I don't feel like advertising for myself.

**WW:** *What's your last car film about?*

**SF:** A Ferrari getting stuck in a big puddle of mud, somewhere between Geneva and Lausanne. I might be making another film with cars, but it's too early to think about it.

**WW:** *You moved back to Geneva after a stint in New York in 1983. Do you ever regret that your request to get a green card to stay in the U.S. was refused?*

**SF:** In general, I try not to have regrets. If I didn't get the green card, it's possible that something else was waiting for me somewhere else, because I've been traveling a lot, consistently. And it's convenient having Geneva as a base. You can get to the airport in 15 minutes and not three hours because of traffic jams! So being here has never stopped me from spending time in other places.

**WW:** *When you returned to Geneva, you opened a gallery in the early 1980s that was open from five to seven p.m. and organized events. What was Geneva's art scene like back then?*

**SF:** Geneva's a tiny city and there weren't many galleries and those that did exist were doing things in the normal way, with white walls and well-known things. I wanted to make a meeting point and I didn't care so much for high-quality art, but wanted to help nice people get exposure. I did a graffiti wall where people could do things, and I did a sushi tasting with the first Japanese restaurant that opened in Geneva. It was an experimental space, more of a kind of playground, and I never made any money through it. But we were lucky because somebody had the storefront and we only had to pay for phone bills and stamps.

**WW:** *What kind of art community is there in Geneva and how does living there affect you?*

**SF:** It's just the local artists. My stimulation comes from elsewhere. Geneva is more of a place where I can be unknown and be with my thoughts. When I go to a new city, I'm more curious and I discover new things. Geneva is where I can process what I've gathered from traveling around.

Opposite page:  
Sylvie Fleury  
*Chromo Quartz*  
2001  
Courtesy of Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris/Salzburg

This page, left:  
Sylvie Fleury  
*Mushroom (UG black KK 719), Mushroom (UG 511 Rage Illusion CP), and Mushroom (UG 530 Rage xtc GR)*  
2006  
Fiberglass, metallic car paint  
Various sizes  
Photo by Charles Duprat  
Courtesy of Galerie Thaddaeus Ropac, Paris/Salzburg