



JASON JACQUES GALLERY

POL MARA

(BELGIAN, 1920-1998)

POP SINCERITY

Consider the sixties: Twiggy appeared on the scene. MoMA had Campbell's Soup Cans on the wall, and the miniskirt was in. "The Factory," Andy Warhol's studio, was producing superstars. Rock music was all the rage, television was ubiquitous, and the world was on the brink of free love. Truly the height of the post-war era was in full swing, and it would soon give way to student uprisings, counter culture, and the frenzy of the decades to follow.

From this social climate emerged Pol Mara, Pop artist divine. He was a painter, illustrator, lithographer, cultural ambassador, and Belgian—though there is now a Musée de Pol Mara in France. Pol Mara was the man who would take Pop in a new direction^{1,2}. Born Leopold Leysen, his moniker was an acronym which stood for "Pour Oublier Laideur. Métamorphoses, Amour, Rêve, Amitié." (To forget ugliness. Metamorphosis, love, dreams, friendship).

Pol Mara grew up and worked for most of his life in Antwerp, where he studied at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts. He continued at the National Higher Institute for Fine Arts and thereafter became a graphic designer at Janssen Pharmaceutica. In 1958, Pol Mara founded an avant-garde group, G-58 Hessenhuis, which consisted of André Bogaert, Pol Bury, René Guiette, and Paul Van Hoeydonck. Hessenhuis refers to the 16th-century building they turned into their exhibition space, and the movement towards the avant-garde helped ground Antwerp and Pol Mara himself in the international arts scene³. By 1962 the Hessenhuis closed its doors and Pol Mara subsequently began his career abroad, traveling to Mexico, Japan, Israel, India, and the United States. He had a major exhibition in New York in 1965.

After his forays into figurative symbolism and lyrical abstraction in the late 1940s and throughout the 1950s, the 1960s saw the emergence of photo-image in the visual vocabulary of Pol Mara's paintings. This gave his mature work its particular look, which lasted through the end of his career in the 1990s. His work in Pop painting featured numerous references to his abstract period: bright, bold fields of color, expressive textures, and monumental scale. He did not see his visual environment in terms of the sacred and profane, and hence was able to seize the potential for explicit expression of beauty through a commonly commodified typology of images.

The inclusion of imagery, figuration, and motifs from print advertisements, television, and film gives Pol Mara's artwork the universality of these popular forms of media⁴. There is no concern with the materialization of painting, nor its place as commodity or institutional critique. His work is grounded in the era which produced it but it also has further reaching implications. He does not seek to remove his own subjectivity but rather to universalize it and to open his vision of beauty to the eyes of all. Pol Mara's rebellion against the ugliness, injustice, and mundanity of the everyday comes from common imagery. In fact, figuration emerges in Pol Mara's work by way of the photo-image as if by necessity, an unavoidable response to the actual visual landscape and cultural conditions of his era. By alluding to photography outside of what is broadly classed as "fine art," Pol Mara summons the ephemerality, immediacy, and illusory nature of the photo-image to the foreground of his viewer's perception.

1 "Musée Pol Mara, Gordes, visite." ViaFrance. <http://www.viafrance.com/fr/france/evenements/musee-pol-mara-gordes-visite-e-381062>.

2 "Mara." Artxs. <http://www.artxs.nl/polmara.htm>.

3 "Pol Mara." Kunstzolder.be. <http://www.kunstzolder.be/en/people/artist/pol-mara-0>.

4 "Mara." Artxs. <http://www.artxs.nl/polmara.htm>.

Pol Mara's color fields are a permanent fixture in his art. The emotive force and visual weight is amplified by the large scale of his works and transposed onto the figures within them, helping them turn from images to iconic representations of desire, beauty, and sensuality⁵. He at once flattened and shattered the picture plane while maintaining a striking pictorial unity. His dedication to figuration through photography, and liberal use of the human figure as both the subject of a painting and as a compositional device within it, gives his work more than a hint of the surreal. When gazing at the subjects in Mara's paintings one cannot help but wonder if one is looking into their dreams or one's own.

In hindsight, this desire to confront problems in art through genuine expression, painting "life and love," in his own words, makes Pol Mara unique in spite of his modernist aesthetics. His early work in figurative abstraction is influenced by early modernists like Paul Klee and Yves Tanguy; his penchant for the aesthetics of photomontage harken back to Dada. It is the choice to confront mass media, war, and the ubiquity of images, with optimism, joy, and sensuality, that puts Pol Mara on the map. Call it Pop Sincerity— call it Pop Erotica.

In Pol Mara's mature work he invokes youth, vigor, and a will to experience life. The physicality of the bodies of the subjects within his work is emphasized by their impossible positioning, nudity, and scale. It is a hypnagogic world, populated by beautiful young women wearing undergarments, or less, that unavoidably raises the question of the male gaze. It must be stated that such observation and criticism does not devalue Pol Mara's work but reaffirms the status of his art as cultural artifact, as a true expression of its time. Marcel Van Jole said: "Everything is present in his work, everything that agitates out days and nights, the liberation of woman, of the girl, the rise of sexuality, the impatience of youth, greedily wanting to enjoy everything without waiting," which is to say that Pol Mara captured the perfunctory abundance of the 20th century⁶. His paintings do not contain the distended, disillusioned personalities of American Pop Art, but "young, fresh, healthy, exuberant, uncomplexed" youth. Though they project a potent sexuality into their surrounding of pectoral space, the viewer can only observe with a sense of voyeurism.

The magic of Pol Mara's work manifests in his ability to transmute images steeped in commodity-culture and perceived as commercial or quotidian art into lovely visions, both separate from and contingent upon the emergent mass media which originally produced them. He reorients a viewer's approach to the aesthetics of commodity. His artwork has been called escapist, but really it maintains a revelatory quality that implores viewers to re-approach their personal visions of the world around them. Pol Mara decried sterility, apathy, and the supposed obsolescence of beauty, pleasure, and sensuality— a voice calling out in the wilderness.

⁵"Pol Mara" Kunst in Huis. <https://kunstinhuis.be/kunstenaar/20775>.

⁶ Hammock, Vergil. Foncé, Jan. Van Jole, Marcel. Xuriguera, Gérard. Pol Mara. Lannoo Uitgeverij Publishing. 1990.