

Red Lips

Mai Ghoussoub

The artist's circular announced:

'We are building an Installation on the theme of refugees. One part of the installation consists of objects that you could carry along if you had to leave your home, at a short notice, with an unknown future.' The objects sent to the artists carried mainly memories of survival: keys, deeds, diplomas, radios, purses... One item looked puzzling and defied what seemed essential for a future of migration into the unknown: a red, strong strident lipstick tube! A light and superfluous memory into the future, or was it so?

Not for me, I understood immediately from where the sender's survival reflex drew its source. She, for it cannot be but a woman, or a man who feels like a woman, was ready to move onto a dark road carrying a strong message of life and a defiant energy. I understood because of the red lipstick marks that are still haunting a corner of my memory, hidden like an explosive dream in a now abandoned convent that stood discreetly on a hill, high up in the Lebanese mountains...

I was a teenager preparing for the Baccalaureat exam with my friends Nada and Joumana; the location was ideal for tranquillity and concentration. Silence and a long dissuasive distance from the city and its attractions, were definitely crucial for our studious goal. A convent run by Italian nuns for young novices secluded like we needed to be (only for two weeks as far as we were concerned) from male presence. 'Retraite' was the word we used in those days: Retreating, withdrawing from ordinary life, from our routine but

mainly from the lightness of normal being.

The convent was hauntingly silent, for we learned from a somewhat less rigorous Italian nun, that the order was hosting young, very young girls coming from 'respectable families' whose fortunes had known better times and who for lack of a dowry were un-marriageable. A convent was the most suitable alternative for these would-be spinsters and this one in particular where only girls from 'a bonne famille' were admitted. The deadly silence that surrounded us was immaculate thanks to the binding oath made by every newcomer - 'a privileged girl' as our nun put it- to be mute for six months. The few Italian nuns who run the place spoke as little and as softly as possible out of respect for the novices' vow and out of love for 'the tears of Mary and the suffering of her son, Jesus Christ'.

There were tens of novices, rushing silently through the dark corridors. We met them briefly on our way to the dining room and our curious eyes searched eagerly for their faces that always managed to escape our gaze. Their eyes avoided us, fixing incessantly the tiled floor whenever they walked passed us. Their bodies looked small and fragile under their neat black tunics. Only the Mother-Superior appeared tall and upright in this convent. Her instructions, uttered through her thin lips, on the first day of our 'retreat' Nada, Jaoumana and I were as stiff as the rules that presided over the lives of this community of secluded and hushed women.

We were scheduled to spend two weeks in this haven of perfect isolation, but on the seventh day, the scene that recurs like a dark red dream in my sleepless nights, turned the convent into disarray cutting short

our worthy and scholarly endeavour. It is because of this scene, on the seventh day in that remote convent, that I understand how a refugee can proudly hold a lipstick tube in the face of a threatening future.

Red is the Absolute: it is pure.

Its dazzling powe stands for the warmth of the sun and the mystery of life.

Red is transgression, Red is energy.

The Mother-Superior's lips loosened into a delighted smile, when she informed us that today was the Pope's feast and that the novices would be allowed to roam freely around the convent, to enjoy themselves the way they see fit as long as the vow of silence is respected. Soon, a few novices stood near the door of the large room that Nada, Joumana and I were sharing. Their steps, first timid and hesitant became more assertive upon our insistent hospitality. They were obviously amazed by our messy and overcrowded room and their faces turned crimson and more candid when Nada produced a large tin full of biscuits. They were suppressing their giggles, hiding their mouths with their hands, as Nada was battling with layers of clothes and books, mingled with some make up kits to free a box packed with sweets and chocolates. A bullet like stick fell away rolling noisily on the bare floor. Joumana picked it up and moved towards the mirror. Joumana could never resist a lipstick; she pulled its golden cover revealing a bright glittering magenta that she spread magnificently over her stretched lips.

Since the ancient Egyptians, women have been staining their lip with everything from berry juice to Henna, from a paste of red rocks to the combo of wax. Ancient Egyptians went to their graves with rouged lips.

I do not have a clear memory of how it all started. All I can see now is a room turned upside down by a bewildering frenzy. The novices were scratching their faces with all the lipsticks the three of us had carried with us, they took hold of our make-up kits like famished birds of prey competing over their victims. They were snatching them from each others hands, looking for more under the sheets, behind the books, under the tables. Red, cherry red, Mulberry, burgundy paste everywhere, all- around the novices lips. Red like cranberry juice, like deep wounds. Graffiti red, dark orange patches over white skins and pale necks. Soon the novices started exchanging shades of red from lips to lips, rushing back and forth towards the mirror looking victoriously at their own reflection, tearing off their veils and their collars, revealing shaved and patchy skulls, sweeping the mirror they had kissed over and over to make new space for more lip-marks, fresh red stains over its surface.

Red, the colour of fire and blood.

It is the fire which burns inside the individual ... Below the green of the Earth's surface and the blackness of the soil, lies the redness, pre-eminently holy and secret. It is the colour of the soul, the libido and of the heart. It is the colour of esoteric lore forbidden to the uninitiated.

A novice, short and wilful looking with her flushed baby face went onto wild intoxicating motions. She kept bending her torso throwing her shaved head downwards, then springing her body upright flinging her arms in all directions. She seemed to perform an angry and disconnected ritualized dance, oblivious of the uproar and chaos surrounding her. Noises emerged from the red faces that twirled and rushed around filling the room with a buzzing mad clatter. Sounds like shrieking laughter came out of red candy throats and brown glitter tongues. Screams like warriors seeking a desperate victory emerged from the now revealed and shaved heads of the frantic novices. Patches of hair scattered over their skull like a badly tended lawn. I suddenly realised that more novices joined in the frenzied feast, turning our room into a threatening sight of violet and wine-dark surfaces.

Red embodies the ardour and enthusiasm of youth.

It is the colour of blood, the heat of the temper, it gives energy to excitement and to inflamed physical condition. With its warlike symbolism, red will always be the spoils of the war or of the dialectics between Heaven and Earth. It is the colour of Dionysus, the liberator and Orgiast.

The tall and dark figure of the Mother-Superior stood straight putting a sudden end to the uncontrollable vitality of the room. She must have been there unnoticed for a while until silence fell upon the space that looked like an abandoned and desolate battlefield. A heavy and long silence that emphasized the languid embrace of two novices oblivious to the sudden change of mood around them. Her eyes half closed, her head leaning on the wall, one of the two was lustfully offering her neck, full of red lip marks, to the passionate kisses of the other.

Rage, like red burning arrows, tensed the lips of the Mother-Superior, intensifying the paleness of her complexion. She appeared like a colourless mask strapped inside her black tunic, rigid like a rope-walker immobilised in a snapshot. 'Stop it' she finally managed to scream. Her cry had the effect of a slap hitting the two novices on the face. They disentangled their bodies furtively and rushed out of the room.



Henri Matisse, *Odalisque in Red Trousers*, 1921 Centre National d'Art et de Culture Georges Pompidou, Paris.

Red the colour of the heart. Red like in forbidden, free, impulsive.

Red roses like the petals of desire. Did you know that in the 1700s the British Parliament passed a law condemning lipstick stating that 'Women found guilty of seducing men into matrimony by a cosmetic means could be tried for witchcraft. How was this law received in the' red district'?

Her words resonated in the soundless room as if they were slashing its air. Her skin was pink with frustrated anger, her cheeks dreadfully colourless. She emerged like a general summoning a fallen army in a desolate and chaotic battlefield. The novice who was dancing and spinning like a drunken scarecrow was now lying on the floor, smiling through her half-opened lips – pink-purple lips- in a state of placid and satisfied absence. Looking straight above the chaos of our room, the Mother-Superior seemed like anger itself, controlled and obstinate.

Red is anger.

Red warns, forbids and awakens vigilance. Red is blood, Red is fire, Red like full-bodied wine is the devil's choice.

'Evil. Dirty. Evil'. Words emerged from the depth of her mouth as if struggling through her thin lips. 'The devil has conquered your souls and your flesh. The womb of your mothers has rejected you and you

have fallen into a dark abyss. Shame, shame on you, on your families. Ugly girls, your lips are scarlet like the sinner's lips. Jesus will not be sacrificed twice, you will not be saved. Your bad blood has pierced your skin and stained your tunics. You will burn in hell, in deep red flames. Only fire will cleanse your puffed lips and your spoiled innocence'.

The Mother-Superior's tongue was moving fast, spinning like a wounded snake inside her wax-pale face. She was shaking but holding herself upright, stiff and furious; she was exhorting the forces of evil that had bewitched her novices. 'Go back to your rooms and lock yourselves in. You have wounded Jesus-Christ and desecrated his home.

Nocturnal red is the colour of the fire which burns within the individual and the earth. It is the colour of the devil's laughter, of hell's flames. Red is revolt.

There was a war and the Convent is no longer there. It is said that two novices had stayed behind. They had rented a house not far from the abandoned convent. The villagers claim that two women still live in the brick house not far from the convent, they keep to themselves and live like hermits. But all those who have come close to their house swear that their lips are always bright and heavily painted.