

MODEL BOYFRIEND

SUSAN BOZIC

THE DATING PORTFOLIO, MSVU ART GALLERY, HALIFAX. JULY 18 TO OCTOBER 4, 2009.

Looking at the images in *The Dating Portfolio* by Vancouver photographer Susan Bozic, the work of New York photographer Cindy Sherman comes to mind. Both artists carefully create roles and scenes for themselves to occupy in front of the camera, as a way to describe the inflated dimensions of media-constructed images or characters and, each in their own ways, to deflate them.

Using specific motifs and formats, such as movie stills, Sherman focuses on, to use Bozic's words, "the different roles and stereotypes that women finds themselves in."

If Sherman is after the stereotypical, Bozic pursues the archetypal in *The Dating Portfolio* by presenting—and this is the key difference she sees between her work and Sherman's—"one woman, and her fantasy."

That fantasy is the universal ideal known as the perfect boyfriend, the so-called Mr. Right. In her eyes, he is without flaws. Therefore, their love is flawless. Only he matters in this story. "It's Carl's girlfriend's version of their love story," says Bozic on the phone from Vancouver.

Through the entire narrative sequence, which charts the course of various 'ships (courtship, relationship, possible domestic partnership), Bozic sincerely and convincingly plays this part—the adoring gaze is mastered without schmaltz or camp—of the *girlfriend*, of whom we know little, if anything, about, except all the good and kind things Carl does for her. She is the adulator, the lens, vessel, mirror to his perfection.

Perhaps you've had a friend or relative who says, "then he did this, then he did that" all the time, while you're sitting there, smirking, trying not to burst out laughing and talking about everything wrong about him; knowing that he is, like the rest of us, only human.

But Carl isn't human. He's far from perfect because he's



Susan Bozic, *All I said was that my feet were a little sore*, 2005.
C-print, 76.2 cm x 101.6 cm.

plastic, an idealized form. He's a mannequin, carefully chosen by the artist after hundreds of *models* were considered online before she made her choice and Carl was finally purchased.

"I decided to get Carl because he represented that artificiality and [was] a surrogate for a human being," Bozic says.

Artificiality and surrogacy link back to her previous portfolios—all in black and white, while this latest is in colour—placing taxidermied animals (birds mostly) as the centerpieces of elaborately imagined settings, like still-life paintings.

Once she had Carl, Bozic wondered: "What am I going to do with him? I have to put him in some sort of context, something else I can comment on.

"Dating is the activity that they're doing, but really this portfolio is more about the ideals and the expectations we have and the source of those ideals and expectations."

The influences start in childhood. "Women, from an

early age, read those stories, the *Cinderella* stories and the *Snow White* stories. It tends to be this scenario of this Prince Charming sweeping them off their feet. And the idea of *happily ever after*. I think it's really ingrained in girls becoming women."

Sure, it's funny (the whole show often makes one laugh out loud) to see Carl manipulated into various gestures and stances, while dressed in different outfits. But it's his girlfriend who commands our attention, directing our search for meaning or connection; some sign that she knows what's true and what's false, what's real and not. As girlfriend, her attention is constantly on Carl (she never looks straight into camera; she's blissfully unaware of being viewed, unlike, say, a Cindy Sherman figure).

Still, Bozic says, television, magazines, advertising and online media bring pressures to bear and shaping the same mindset of men too: "If we have an attractive partner or if we have certain material possessions we'll be happy automatically."

The photographer wants *The Dating Portfolio* to engage people in a dialogue, a series of questions. "Sometimes we don't know why we want certain things, or why we're influenced by certain things. If we look at our desires and our wants, I think we should question them," she says.

Having worked in film, Bozic knew where and how to procure props and wardrobe (more colours) from Vancouver's movie industry. Every gesture, expression, position and location is carefully detailed, choreographed. As the story progresses, scenes and objects continue to reflect a greater sense of romanticism and indulgence. "I had to get a boat. I didn't own one and didn't know anyone who owned one." She eventually found someone willing to lend a vessel for the shoot.

In another, Carl and his girlfriend meet on the tarmac, just prior to boarding his private jet. "There's an element of luxury because again we're being sold the ideal when we're watching TV or looking at magazines. Everything is perfect in those images—they're cleaned up."

Indeed, even when they're sharing a bathroom in the morning, they're not bumping into each other, scowling, jockeying for position, accusing each other of spitting all over the place or reeking up the room.

The series of 15 images take viewers to a dramatic point, a high point in the action, when Carl asks his girlfriend to move in with him. Her answer, and all that happens next, comes in the next series. It's Bozic's version of a "cliffhanger," from classic soap operas. ■

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