

Evelyne Axell

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Axell was one of the most exceptional Belgian artists of the second half of the twentieth century, and that for two reasons. First, the force of her personal vision of the joyously free woman, proud of her body and able to share desire with others. In that respect she fought against the taboos that held women in thrall. Second, because of her ceaseless experiments with the plastic materials with which she worked towards the end of her brief career. It is this combination of a daringly fresh vision and the mastery of new materials that made Axell such a singular artist: she turned these materials into the perfect expressive vehicle for her vision. She was at once the lyrical poet of unshackled eroticism and a technical pioneer.

Axell's emphasis on female sexuality, in the climate of the late 1960s, led to her being considered an extreme feminist, but as she herself said: «I like men too much to be a true feminist». If feminist she was, she was a moderate one.

Critical opinion has, broadly speaking, designated Axell as a Pop Artist. If it is true that she made some use of a Pop Art vocabulary, for instance strip cartoon imagery, the Axell vision was not an ironic Pop Art comment on women as desirable objects of a consumer society, but one portraying women as free to participate in eroticism in all its forms.

If man is the usual object of female desire he is absent from most of Axell's images. But his presence is revealed symbolically in the form of gear sticks in cars (*Erotamobiles*) or phallic shapes such as ice cream cones. Sapphic love is often to the fore, with girls kissing or embracing each other, and auto-eroticism is also a theme. Whatever form eroticism takes, Axell places great emphasis on women's genitals.

The Surrealism of Magritte was as much part of Axell's background as Pop Art. Thus some of Magritte's images return, lightly transformed, in Axell. Matisse's grouped female nudes and his paper cut-outs were other influences. The car is important in Axell's work, as it was to be in her death. The sexual associations of Axell's cars can be seen in *Axell-Ération*.

In 1967 Axell discovered the possibilities of plastic. She replaced painting in oils by painting with enamel on different plastic materials - Clartex, Plexiglass, Polyester, Formica, Unalit and so on - sometimes mounted on aluminium placed on wood. This new technique provided her with the opportunity to paint transparent or opalescent images, a method that endowed her nudes with a mysterious milky aura.

Axell's mentor, Magritte, stated: «Undoubtedly, one pure and powerful emotion, eroticism, kept me from falling ... into a more traditional search for formal perfection». Axell could have said the same. Killed in a car accident at thirty-seven, her painting career of seven years resembled the transitory passage of a comet, brilliant but short. But now this comet is starting to shine once more. It may soon become a fixed star in the firmament.
