

Culture Vulture

A Wind of Revolution Blows

By Alice Anokhina · December 6, 2008



A few years ago, Sofia Coppola gave us *Marie Antoinette*. She gave us lavish dresses, exquisite delicacies, frivolous parties, gorgeous sunsets and absurd, gauche hairstyles. The curtain fell with the guillotine, and that was the end of that. Sharon Kivland picks up where Coppola left off, in a tiny gallery tucked away behind the Tate Britain, to tell us the rest of the story.

A Wind of Revolution Blows is a strange, disjointed sort of exhibit. Here you'll find carefully printed and framed excerpts from French texts, embroidered aprons and doctored postcards, all brought together by two concurrent themes: Women and Revolution.

At first glance, the artworks are a nostalgic nod to femininity in the past. Kivland recreates ink and watercolour drawings from an 1848 fashion magazine; it's all petticoats and bonnets and healthy blush on plump cheeks (how very different to the lanky, tanned models of today!). Elegant gloves are carefully arranged under a glass case.

But look a little closer and the metaphorical rose is in reality made of metaphorical stone, the foundations of the class revolution. The petticoats, they're from the same year as the first publication of the Communist Manifesto. The pretty pastel gloves, they scream in embroidered defiance: *liberté, fraternité, égalité*. A black velvet pair solemnly concludes: *ou la mort*. This is an exhibition to make us question the distinction between conformity and rebellion, femininity and feminism.

You need to pick up a flyer at the door. Kivland makes strong, anthropological statements with her work; unfortunately, they are concealed under a layer of focused historical study and foreign language. A silver necklace carefully nested in a velvet box appears out of place and redundant, until the accompanying description explains that the word *pétroleuse* means both 'cock-tease' and 'a woman who voices her political opinions too vehemently'. If you went to university, you'll remember your favourite lecturer, the one who interspersed a boring stream of facts with anecdotes and stories. Kivland is that lecturer, reaching out through the medium of art and metaphor.

Academics who turn their attention to women in society tend to go down one of the two available routes: either the observational, matter-of-fact approach, or the bra-burning, how-could-you approach. Kivland is probably the only person in the world who has achieved a happy middle, rejecting neither female beauty, nor female strength.

Despite this, there is a certain sadness in her work. A large tableau at the exhibition's entrance contains excerpts from *On the Education of Women*, a 1783 text. 'Abandoned at birth,' the tableau reads, 'neither slaves nor tyrants. Their only resource was to seduce. A smooth skin. Inflamed blood.'

'Look how far we have come,' Kivland seems to say. Yet when the delicate pleats and rosy cheeks and r's that effortlessly roll off your tongue fade from memory, when you're walking home in the dark and frosty wind of December in London, you have to ask yourself: So how much further do we have to go?

A Wind of Revolution Blows, the Storm is on the Horizon
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