

Fata Morgana

Ubah Hassan is in the North African desert dressed in gold. Somalia to Morocco by way of Canada. How did she make the journey? A mix of magical mystery and economics no doubt. It always comes down to money - the want of it, the having of it - and the stories with which we clothe our desire for it. Surely she wasn't guided here by her decorously attendant companion with the harem pants and the Indiana Jones shirt and accessories. Neither, I'm certain, did she arrive on that motor bike, that pristine machine untouched by the least particle from the dust cloud that rises behind. No heat from the engine, which hasn't run, only warmth from the sun that stirs the air so that it wraps itself around your body like the bias cut fabric that hangs and clings so desirably. When the surrounding atmosphere is the same temperature as your skin, you feel space moving as part of yourself, within you as much as outside and around you. And somehow the absence of any temperature gradient sees your fantasies take licence to emerge into the day's fading light and mingle with the sounds and the scents they find there. It's sound that takes Pound to the house of smooth stone where Circe drugs and enchants Odysseus and his crew:

'Thkk, thgk', of the loom
'Thgk, thkk' and the sharp sound of a song
under olives.

Here is Ubah selling us our dreams, dreams woven into the golden cloth. Spotless before the dust cloud: pink dust and pale gold. What did Vogue tell us when they first saw this? Ralph Lauren, they said, has taken 'a trip around the world - to Africa and the Orient, to be precise'. Yes, that's precise enough. We don't need, and certainly don't want any more precision than that. Africa and the Orient: a half-image/half-idea whose vagueness can only serve to amplify its seductive power. Even as you bridle at the vapid, noxious, insolent ignorance of this non-geography you know that it will work its spell on you. It will lure you with its promise of spiced warmth and birdsong, just as the irresistible singing of the sirens lured Odysseus. On this occasion it's the song of the nightjar. In harmony with the half-image and the half-idea he is a crepuscular creature who favours the in-between, what Pound calls the 'half-dark'. And while Odysseus travels, Penelope weaves and unravels, weaves and unravels.

The weave here, intreccio, is a fantastical one, a mirage, fata morgana. Another journey: legend gives us the enchantress Morgan le Fay travelling from Arthurian England to the waters of Sicily where, consorting with the sirens, she builds enticing castles in the air that trick the sailors. Woman, of course, is always the dangerous one, the one who plots and conspires to undermine us and lead us astray. Isn't that the biggest plot of all? - the siren song of a system working to make us believe such a contemptible notion? But look at the things that system produces – the garments made from such an astonishing range of materials in a breathtaking variety of colour and pattern. Don't just buy them, let the world know you've bought them. Carry them home in this lovely, big-bottomed bag, and this one, and this one, and this one ... You deserve to wear them, not just anywhere, but in a location that does justice to them, and more importantly, that does justice to you. You deserve it, don't you? Don't tell me that you don't believe this; don't tell me that you don't want this.

These sirens are sirens of the desert, carrying into its sands the glories of classical antiquity in the way their fabrics fall, fold, are tied and gathered up, draping nothing but themselves and their eccentric supporting frames. We might find their ancestors on the Parthenon frieze, chipped and abraded by time, marred by war, plundered by empire. Think of the limbless, headless torso from the west pediment we call Iris, of whom Kenneth Clark wrote that 'the subtle and complex drapery both reveals the nude figure and accentuates its surging movement, like ripples on a wave'. Odysseus the trickster again, on the wine dark sea, lashed to the mast so that he could hear the siren song and take his fill of it without running the danger of finding himself ashore, held in thrall until the flesh fell from his bones. But what need of flesh at all, now that we have a superior alternative? These sirens are not creatures of ancient myth, they are modern, up to date. Stylish and on trend they proudly present us with their surgically enhanced, firm, round, perfect breasts. The balls that form them are an image of a purported ideal. Do you know the land where the lemon trees blossom? (Let's not run from cliché.) One thinks of Koons's floating basketballs, but in his case the contrived equilibrium always breaks down and the balls slowly descend to the floor of their tank. Here they sit high and full and unsagging. Drooping is not a possibility, not an option, not allowed. Who wants this? Do you? Fragmented and augmented bodies, limbless and beautiful bodies; bodies that

are more than beautiful because they are augmented, perfect because they are fragmented. It's preposterous, and it's what happens, what we see around us all the time. We can reject this attitude, refuse to go along with such behaviour, but we know as we do that it is just a symptom of that larger, monstrous collusion that gathers us into its embrace and drips into our ear the promise of effortless poise and leisurely comfort, the outrageous false promise, in other words, of a body fully at ease with itself.

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