

Blood and the Bourgeoisie

by Alison Kubler

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The darkly evocative baroque paintings of VR Morrison owe an inspirational debt to her adopted home of Montpellier, France where the artist currently resides and paints. Brimming with veiled eroticism and tinged with the suggestion of brutal violence perpetrated, Morrison's highly realistic paintings of tortured females pay homage both to the painter Caravaggio and the impossibly chic contemporary French woman; for Morrison, the iconic French woman is a thoroughly modern symbolic heroine as seen through the prism of bloody French history. Like these chic continental women she observes and admires, Morrison's paintings are deeply compelling and alluring. Her subjects are richly painted in lustrous cinematic hues that evoke film noir and the palettes of the European masters whose influence is palpable given the artist's proximity to so many great collections.

The decapitated women in Morrison's *The Decadent Morsels* and *French Manicure* reference the many women who lost their heads throughout France's blood thirsty history. With their improbable beauty, they are complex metaphorical constructions of femininity; an amalgam of saints such as Joan of Arc as well as that ultimate poster girl for decadence, Marie Antoinette, as alluded to by the exhibition title *Blood and the Bourgeoisie*. Morrison's femme fatales (literally) nevertheless seem to eschew victimhood; rather, they operate as sexy medusas or powerful hydras bewitching the viewer with their full lips and tousled locks. Part Madonna and whore, they fit the stereotypical paradigm of much contemporary fashion imagery, which Morrison draws on as an aesthetic influence, although she paints from photographs of personal friends as opposed to professional models, carefully choosing accompanying props such as killer stiletto heels, that increase the sexual tension.

Morrison reinterprets *The Allegory of St Agathe* to create a searing update on the traditionally gruesome Catholic moral tale. The young Agatha (to whom a church in Montpellier is dedicated), was mutilated by having her breasts cut off for refusing the sexual advances of a Roman prefect. She is rendered here holding a delicately wrapped and bleeding package. All innocence and tremulous bravery, this Saint Agatha might be the contemporary face of breast cancer, that most ubiquitous and heinous of diseases. Dressed in hip denim jeans, her suppurating breasts wrapped in a pink ribbon, she turns her back to the viewer, stoically containing her grief, her eyes brimming with restrained tears. Exquisitely beautiful and deeply macabre, she is a gutsy, sexy heroine.