

# FEEL NO SHAME

## ARTFUL SEDUCTION AND POWER PLAY

Wilma Sütö

Say the name 'Charlotte Schleiffert' and lightning starts to flash. Lines zigzag across the picture in almost all her drawings and paintings. They splash off the figures who turn themselves and one another inside out, with the demonstrative passion of porno stars. Bright red sparks from lips to hips. 'A small fire', is what Schleiffert calls it. You automatically take a step backwards when confronted with a painting like that, with the measurements of a bed-sheet that's been inaugurated to boot. It's better for the overall view too, to have a bit of distance. However, even when action is minimal, Schleiffert's work crackles. In the drawings - still more than comfortable in size - the action is generally limited to one figure. Usually a woman, posing full-length, larger than everyday life: as a warrior, pin-up, cover girl or pop idol. Her teeth flash, her nails glitter. If a point shows up anywhere, it will be sharp, from stiletto heels to tongue. Even the frills of a wedding dress are electrified.

'You must keep on searching,' Schleiffert says, 'to ensure that the fire keeps burning. Without fuel you lose emotion. Then the work fizzles out.' It's a good thing she herself is aware of that danger; no-one else could have thought it up for her. Since Schleiffert completed her art studies in Den Bosch and the postgraduate Ateliers '63 course in Haarlem a good ten years ago, she has been stepping up the vitality. The lightning in her work is all about the confrontation between man and woman, rich and poor, beautiful and ugly, weak and strong. It is painted as both raw and sensual, in equal measure: a fierce, colourful confrontation, nevertheless encompassing more than just sensuous excess. Schleiffert is clear about it: 'True, I give it a very physical form, but psychological contests are taking place. Who has the power, who is the prey?' Her drawings and paintings depict human role play, especially on the fringes of civilisation, where such play grows harsher and becomes a contest. Life becomes a struggle for life, although, with Schleiffert that always means with head held high, challenging and grotesque.

Her heroes are imaginary figures, crosses between people she meets in the street and celebrities from television or from photos in newspapers, magazines and books. The 'society of pictures' opens up like a puppet show, in which Punch and Judy's guests have been made up and spotlighted by Schleiffert. Suddenly a hard black shadow falls across the face of the sex bomb Pamela Anderson, as if her features have been marked by the nightlife of the prostitutes who solicit in the street near Schleiffert's studio in Rotterdam. The artist doctors life in the gutter with the glamour of idols. She portrayed the distress of coke snorters and heroin addicts gawping at her when she was in New York in 1995 in close-ups of their faces, as intrusive as billboards: junkies in the star roles of their lives. 'In New York their misery was everywhere,' Schleiffert adds, 'it was impossible not to paint it. If there's no such need, it won't work. I may look at millions of pictures, but something must break through before I can turn one of them into something.'

In this way Schleiffert fans the fire for herself and for her public: she looks for the life behind the print, or drags it out. Not only does she appropriate countless documentary photos by copying them in her drawings and reworking them in her paintings, but she travels a great deal too, long, distant journeys, as if wanting to check out for herself the mechanised picture the mass media portrays of the world. And to brush it up. 'My fury about abuse of power, about injustice and hypocrisy forces me to work,' she explains. 'I object violently to something or am filled with enormous aggression. Then a painting must result.' Her fury ensures that compassion does not degenerate into sentimentality. *With excruciating pain, but without tears* is the caption accompanying the press photo she copied in a drawing of an African orphan, who gazes, wide-eyed, at us through a barred window, both calm and tormented. He is the worldly brother of 'the boy with the tear' who - stuck in the famous tear-jerking painting - shares the drunkards' distress in pubs. In one of Schleiffert's works he seizes the opportunity to reverse his powerlessness. He rises larger than life, like a knight in Renaissance armour, but with a gangsta-rapper's head. This time he's in control, ready for the fray, as the motto on his dagger confirms: *...and it don't stop.*

Better be warned! Schleiffert's work is a grim combination of artful seduction and power play. The conveniently-sized drawings, which are the start of it all, are the only works adhering to their documentary origins. After that, the artist absconds with the impressions she has accumulated here and there: not only in Europe, but also in the United States, Cuba, Mexico, Thailand, Tibet and China. If anyone succeeds in portraying intercultural society, she is the one, with her exotically-garbed army. 'I want to make a mixture of times and places,' Schleiffert says. 'My figures are not always particularly happy with their lives and dream of alternatives. They embody the longing for another world.' Her rapper's armour harks back to a journey through Tuscany, where she studied the Renaissance in sculptures by Donatello, Verrocchio and Michelangelo. The costume of a statue is sometimes enough for her; sometimes she subjects the entire figure to a metamorphosis, compared with which the cosmetic surgery in the American television programme *Extreme Makeover* is cinch. In Verrocchio's original portrayal, the biblical hero David conquers Goliath, posing with his enemy's severed head at his feet, but Schleiffert gives the impression that he has cut off his own head, exchanging it for a female one. With its unruly red curls and daubed-on lipstick, the bronze figure materialises as a high-handed transsexual.

Schleiffert's heroes revel in rivalry with themselves, one another and the public. The figures in her huge drawings know how to assume an intimidating pose. They stand head-on with the viewer, straight-backed, head high, ready for the trial of strength. But they are capable of enticing and ogling too. In the extreme. When, with a radiant smile, they perform a striptease, you can bet your life it will surpass the average naughty dream. Physically challenged beauties reveal their lingerie - and their artificial limbs; added to which *femmes fatales*, wishing to uphold their reputation, display their internal organs. They provide a live variation on the anatomy lesson. *FEEL NO SHAME*, Schleiffert wrote in 1999 on one of her paintings; *FEEL NO PAIN* on another canvas in the same year - the year in which she won the first prize in the Prix de Rome for painting. The phrases *feel no shame* and *feel no pain* could be her maxim; they form a refrain that echoes through her work, especially through the paintings. Unlike in her work on paper, Schleiffert does not depict solitary figures in her canvases who bar the way for the public, but presents characters who are busy with one another. From top to toe, with hide and hair, they cross the boundaries of shame and pain.

'I'm not interested in beauty alone,' Schleiffert explains. She hunts down the intensity of life. 'Illness can affect a person, and everyone experiences pain or sorrow at times. It's fascinating that nothing is perfect.' Her paintings play the double role of attraction and rejection which characterises love tragedies. The way the canvases are painted may be harsh, yet they celebrate with virtuous gestures the freedom of art. Couples (or trios, or more) copulate their brains out, overrunning their surroundings to fuse with them. Their silhouettes form decorative patterns, templates almost, which blend seamlessly from the foreground into the background. Torsos and limbs of various figures may meld with one another or dissolve into one colour. Purple clashes against red, blue nestles up to green, shocking pink ejaculates. The couples that Schleiffert paints are not partners of flesh and blood, but of paint on canvas. Their presence is often reinforced with other materials. Apart from egg tempera ('less unyielding than oil, not so thick as acrylic'), Schleiffert uses, for instance, PUR foam, plaster, plush, glitter, silver- and plastic foil in her paintings. Her huge drawings can be hung in the middle of a gallery and left to curl over the floor and, similarly, her paintings also take possession of the space. Schleiffert besieges the public with explosive colours and expansive ornaments.

A summons in capital letters stands out: *WE WANT YOU*. A spectator who feels it's meant for him, is flattered and approaches, sees his own movement reflected in the words of gleaming aluminium foil: welcome in the painting! But beware. The picture speaks a different language, as do the small letters at the bottom. They form the programme-like slogan: *Elimination of Men*. The work is loosely and openly painted, with large planes of white, sketch-like lines and semi-abstract collages. Only upon closer inspection will it become clear what is actually happening and precisely how the female figures on the canvas cope without a man. Nevertheless they are demonstrating that tangibly enough, with their candy pink PUR foam toy complete with iron wire protrusions: a goading variety of vibrator that as yet has not been featured in the annual catalogue published by *Viva*, one of the pioneering Dutch chick mags in that respect. While Schleiffert complains that interest in her work all too often becomes a focus on content at the expense of form. 'The subject is important, but the way I render it is equally important.' OK, but let's not feign ignorance in defiance of possible formal analyses of the afore-mentioned candy pink toy. The primary reaction from a male viewer is also telling: *Elimination of Charlotte Schleiffert!*

The game as a contest and the contest as a game: Schleiffert likes to hold on to that ambiguity. She is surprised when someone takes her parodies personally. 'Far too serious! When a situation is enlarged it often becomes twice as comical, but simplification of it can have the same effect. It's a kind of humour that makes a playful thing vicious or extra impudent. Even when I'm dealing with serious subjects, my work must possess lightness to distinguish it from political manifestos. At the same time, you can note the balancing of colour and form.' Schleiffert alternates light and dark, soft and hard in her work, as if she is keeping time with the images on television, from video clip to newscast. A Lil' Kim wannabe dances up, hips rotating, her low-slung belt bearing the bald statement: *Men are Dogs*. As Schleiffert puts it: 'That's such a crude comment that you just have to do something with it.' It is clear from various paintings that she's serious about the subject of sexism. For instance, there is the oppressive, black canvas containing the word '*raped*'. As well as the canvas saturated with blood-red and purple 'about aborting girls'. The former is a reaction to the vast numbers of rapes in Johannesburg, 'Where men seem to think they can rid themselves of AIDS by deflowering children'. The latter, a reaction to a Chinese baby selection process.

The style Schleiffert has cultivated - violent and seemingly harsh - has a direct, titillating effect, but it is also subservient to her subject matter. Power, lechery, seduction, violence and destruction are never illustrated in detailed figurative scenes, but are evoked by explosive combinations of figuration and abstraction. The strident colours plus robust three-dimensional additions like lumps of black-painted plaster (thick fanciful shapes suggest excrement in the dark painting *Raped*) give the work a forceful physical presence. A sculptural virus has infected the paintings. Moreover, they are still imbued with the action of production, Schleiffert's own exertion. 'People are always asking me if I can't make it cleaner, but that splodginess is part of it. It mirrors my freedom and that of the thing. A painting consists of the transformation of an idea, as well as the transformation of material. There's no such thing as a clean Baselitz. The expression of production is typical of my work.' Schleiffert addresses her canvases from all sides. She does not stand in front of them, but places them on the ground, sits on top of them to paint them, crawls around and over them. 'I don't see the result until I hang them up. On the ground, I'm too close to get a proper overall impression. I watch the proportions, but the outcome may be a surprise. The work has a life of its own.'

However exciting the artist's life, travelling to all corners of the world, may sound, the main thing is that there is enough peace and quiet for hours of concentration in the studio, in Schleiffert's opinion. Though concentration is a slight exaggeration. It must be possible to waste time circling around and making frustrating attempts to get started. Her own mood and the surroundings also interact. The body cult is possibly one of the most fruitful subjects world wide - suggestive, juicy, lewd and playful, as it befits painting - other things play a part too. Her father's illness and his death in 2002, as well as the social poverty she encountered on her travels through Mexico, Cuba and Thailand in the preceding period, resulted in the randy figures disappearing from her work, temporarily at least. 'I didn't feel like that physical stuff and was more sensitive to what was happening in the outside world. It's a deceptive sensitivity, because you need critical detachment when you're painting. You only really learn about that from your own botched canvases. I try to correct paintings that I don't consider successful and if that doesn't work, I throw them out. If not, they continue to bother you.'

When Schleiffert was in Mexico City (2001) farmers from Chiapas, one of the country's poorest regions, were on hunger strike. They were protesting against the unequal distribution of resources, the accumulation of wealth in Mexico City. Schleiffert sympathised with them: 'That's why I painted a battle banner, or freedom banner for them.' There's no need to know the exact background to appreciate the work. It expresses, in general images, social, as well as existential problems. Yet the immediate interaction with reality, forming a correction to the predominating, mechanical picture, determines the forceful dynamics of Schleiffert's paintings. Her 'battle banner' resembles a flag. A majestic black bird looms up - it could be a symbol of freedom, but also of transience. Rosy trails of fur, hanging from the canvas like opulent frayed edges, rhyme with shreds of black paint - perhaps traces of decay - within the multi-coloured painting. As is usually the case with Schleiffert, this work also stemmed from a press photo - a shot of a refuse tip in Chiapas, above which a black bird was actually flying. 'But the tip was swarming with people too,' Scheiffert explains, 'they were digging things out, to sell. It's a business for them, with a veritable hierarchy. Every refuse tip has its boss. Not even the people who grub through the garbage are free.'

After a trip abroad, Schleiffert still returns to Rotterdam. The last time being in the autumn of 2003, after she had lived and worked in China for six months. Even with all her experience, the culture shock is no less intense. She switched on the news and saw the consummate Mabel Wisse Smit. Hysterical, the way the love life of the possible future Dutch princess dominated the news, current affairs programmes and front pages of all the dailies and weeklies. 'Holland seemed absolutely trivial.' Schleiffert was in China at the height of the SARS epidemic. 'But it's such a vast country, I assumed it would pass me by.' Although she did get an infection in her knee from an insect bite that immobilised her for three weeks, she felt lighter than ever in China. Her thoughts return to her own house in sunny seaside Xiamen, where she was able to make entirely shadow-free paintings for the first time: flags of complete freedom. Decorative motifs derived from Chinese and Tibetan ornamentation fill the canvas: light, dreamy and poetic. Bellicose language has made way for phrases that could have escaped from a love song. The letters light up hesitantly behind a still-life of flowers and fruit: *You bring light in*. But they also emerge in garlands meandering exuberantly across the canvas, and sometimes even seem to veer away with an amorous sigh: *Sweetheart, send me to sleep*.

The unrest in the outside world and her own concern about it have taken the back burner. Though undoubtedly only for the time being. Charlotte Schleiffert's oeuvre is imbued with the realisation that the world is always bigger than it seems. The difference between what is familiar and what is alien is still so hard to define; the misunderstanding between the two is far simpler. *Somebody told me it's bad to be with a foreigner* is the text on one of the drawings Schleiffert made in China. A totemistic being introduces itself swaggeringly as a *Very Important Person* with sharp teeth and claws, but eyes shyly closed. How should you look when someone tells you *it's bad to be with a foreigner*? 'Then you know what it means to feel unwanted,' Schleiffert says. In China, which has only been open to tourists since the nineteen-eighties, she stood out: a foreigner and a woman to boot. 'I was strange. And their etiquette was strange for me. Of course I know about the anti-foreigner feelings in my own country, but no-one had ever said anything like that to me.' Schleiffert likes another quotation better. She noticed that the Chinese raise two fingers when being photographed, symbolising the V for Victory. Let that be the very sign with which she, as an artist, sends her growing army of victors into the world! And so, in China, Schleiffert painted her own flag of freedom, with that perfect shout of triumph at the centre: VICTORY.