

Dr. Renée Gadsden

Pauline Marcelle: The Mother of Exiles

Clothes make the man.
Naked people have little or no influence on society.

– Mark Twain

Pauline Marcelle is working on world change each time she bends down. Since 2008, she is grappling with and expanding her *Bend Down Boutique* cycle and hasn't exhausted the possibilities of it yet. Marcelle's premise: clothes define our lives. We need them for protection from the elements, but it seems even more so, we need them and their labels to help us identify ourselves – identify our outer selves to the outer world, and perhaps, to help us better understand how we feel about our own inner selves. The clothes we wear define us, make borders between us and the people we meet, tell stories for us so that we don't have to verbalize them ourselves.

Marcelle is currently working on creating a skyline textile sculpture, composed only of "skyscrapers" in the form of labels from clothing, sewn together so that the mostly rectangular labels create a cityscape of jagged peaks in a make believe cloth metropolis. The hardest part of the sculpture is not the sewing together of the labels, which is painstaking and time-consuming handwork that Pauline Marcelle does herself. The hardest part of the project is getting family and friends to allow her to cut the labels out of their clothes for her use! It seems as if by cutting out the labels, the clothes are "killed". Their identity is lost, their status is lost: without their labels they become orphans.

Exactly this sacrifice very few people in her circle are willing to make. Pauline Marcelle has many more H & M labels than Chanel labels in her skyline, and not only because the people she knows wear the more inexpensive clothes. The more expensive the label, the more intrinsic it seems to be to the clothing's identity, and the less willing the owner seems to be able to part with it. Although, one would say, the lack of a label does not make the item of clothing less functional. But apparently exactly this removal of the label "damages" the clothing. Its alleged primary function, to protect the wearer from the elements and to beautify and set her or him off, would not seem to be infringed upon by removing a label since the vast majority of clothing labels are sewn on the inside of garments. Therefore, a label missing would only be a fact known to the wearer. However, this absence, this loss, is something, which Pauline Marcelle has repeatedly witnessed that people are definitely not willing to endure: the label is a limb that the clothing's owner does not want to part with.

In her hands, the "models" of the paintings and sculptures in the *Bend Down Boutique* series, functional clothing pieces, transmute into shapes, clouds, whirlwinds and dervishes of color and form. Marcelle works almost exclusively with black and white, and with primary colors. She says that these colors are for her akin to the human experience itself. Primary colors, and black and white, occur everywhere, and their combination creates every other color. The colors also symbolize for her "race and creed". Those words are fraught with manifold connotations for a person of Caribbean descent who lives and works in Europe, specifically in Austria, the self-named "Heart of Europe". Pauline Marcelle emphasizes as well that she uses these colors because she does not want to be dependent on commercial production for her palette. She paints in oil; with her knowledge of color chemistry, Marcelle is able to make any color she wants. Color freedom, freedom from color!

One aspect of the *Bend Down Boutique* series that is of key importance for Pauline Marcelle is the constantly changing "home" of these clothing pieces, her models, and their adaptation to the situations they find themselves in. Using industrially produced clothing as a mirror to examine the world, Marcelle touches on themes of capitalistic modes of production, transportation of goods (and people), durability, care, wearability and, using her words: in the last consideration, of "immortality". Labels give clothes a name, a place of origin, traceability. Clothes without labels are like people adrift: "freed of" or driven from their homes, arriving anywhere in masses, just as the bundles of clothing that we in the Western world donate to international help organizations which they ship to distant lands. These clothes are gathered in the West and sent to the South and East where there is apparent "need" of them.

Some of those bundles arrive on the shores of West Africa. Pauline Marcelle has discovered that they often have turned into a plague worse than jellyfish. The clothes are not always properly unloaded, and end up clogging shorelines and beaches. In African bend down boutiques, clothes that

are salvaged from the sea, or from docks, or from wherever they are dumped or deposited, are sold whenever possible by the locals to each other. These “huddled masses” communicate with each other over channels that were created for them by the pre- and post-colonialist world order. Is this their “free will”? Or are they acting out parts in a mechanism not of their own making, and according to rules that they intrinsically cannot understand?

Pauline Marcelle’s oeuvre illuminates those particular themes: choice, self-determination, victimization, travel, self-sufficiency, beauty, and ugliness, among others. Her recent artist’s residency in South Africa further sharpened her awareness of these issues. Dedicated to *l’art pour l’art*, but with a consciousness that embraces broad political topics, Pauline Marcelle creates paintings and objects that are what “we all want art to be”: a sensuous, joyful explosion of color and form that reflects the aurora borealis and Aurora Australis that we each have inside of us. Art that can be enjoyed without having any coded “art blah blah” background information or knowledge. Art that completely represents the maker yet leaves space for the viewer to fill in the blanks. Art for *Jedermann*, and for those whose tastes have reached the distinct level of refinement that encompasses connoisseurship.

Perhaps Pauline Marcelle is the “mighty woman with a torch” written about by Emma Lazarus in *The New Colossus*. If so or if not, in any event, her paintings and sculptures, ideas, films, writings and most of all, her example, provide a flame by which we can light up the cave of darkness and misunderstanding that contemporary society finds itself in now. Pauline Marcelle is looking to change the world one artwork at a time. So open your eyes, and you’d better look out!

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