

214 PORTRAIT ROCHELLE GOLDBERG

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"It is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, an image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation."
Walter Benjamin¹

At the National Archives in Paris a few years ago, a remarkable exhibition documented the historical overlaps between women—categorically, and in the particular—and the French legal code. In *Présumées coupables*, leather-bound volumes stacked heavily into vitrines and exposed under soft lighting presented the oldest record of female agency in all the literature of modern France. Despite colorful vinyl graphics and a digital display, the material weight of this history expressed itself physically. On reams of yellowed parchment overflowing with (illegible) long-hand script, the woman, transgressing patriarchal proscription of social place and sexual difference, was routinely objectified—i.e., described, contained, chastised—and finally judged a criminal.

Among the poisoners, witches, and perpetrators of infanticide were the women blamed for the fires that destroyed civic buildings and private property in May 1871, during the last days of the Paris Commune.² The *pétroleuse* was the perfect villain for the counter-revolutionary forces then recapturing the capital from Versailles. Disparaged as a prostitute or else a vulgar woman disabused of bourgeois morality, the *pétroleuse* was invigorated by smoking, sexual independence, and "love of riot." That specific acts of arson were later attributed to anti-government soldiers reveals the persistence of myth in conservative ideology. The historical violence through which "the feminine" is symbolically controlled, and the false image of the *pétroleuse* sustained, has resurfaced as a problem—as a spectral figure—in the recent sculptural work of Canadian artist Rochelle Goldberg.

Her 2018 exhibition, *Pétroleuse*, at the project space Éclair—formerly a West Berlin bar frequented by male sex workers—centered

on a desolate, delicate installation: dirtied domestic carpets scattered with glowing LED strands, several dozen lit "matchsticks" (cast as they burned), light switch plates, and some loose celery root, above which a bronze mask was staked gingerly at waist height. Shrouded in waxen silk organza, the missing anatomical form of this blind interlocutor gave the impression of weightless suspension—if not self-immolation—over the sordid amber ground of its setting. Mirrors on opposite walls of the gallery endlessly reflected the latent potential for incineration. And the stain of soot—in fact, sand or dirt left over from the process of casting or organic cultivation—alluded to both fire and drought. Resting on the floor in an adjacent room, a series of glass and crystal bowls caught up in a thin sheet of plastic film (*Digesting Gold*, 2018) collected water, gold dust, and atmospheric sediment—as if attempting to recapture some form of elemental value, while balancing the electric aridity of the other installation. The ambiguous gendering of the female figure here is only one of several historical inversions; yet rather than retell, reframe, or recover an identity or fraught narrative, Goldberg instead recharges its once-empty threat. Semantically referencing the seeping petrol in her prior installations, *Pétroleuse* also stages a metaphorically inflammatory environment without any clear organization (good/evil) other than imminent ignition, thus prefiguring radical release. The same work returned, in part or in full, in: *1000 "Emotions"*, Galleria Federico Vavassori, Milan (2018); *Casa del Sol*, Casa Masaccio, San Giovanni Valdarno (2018); and *born in a beam of light*, Chinati Foundation, Marfa (2018) and *The Power Station*, Dallas (2019). In varied configurations and constellations, Goldberg developed a sculptural language by drawing energy from the materially transformative properties of light and heat—yet always in relation to the "low" (ground-level) qualities of a particular terrain, while carrying the spark of rupture as a structural and theoretical device.

1. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 463.

2. "[The] men [...] were dangerous enough. But women posed even greater threats to the social order." Gay L. Gullickson, *Unruly Women of Paris: Images of the Commune* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), p. 58.

All images installation views and details born in a beam of light. The Power Station Dallas, 2019. Courtesy: the artist



Kari Rittenbach, 'Rochelle Goldberg', *CURA 30*, March 2019



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