



Riveting Rosies:

Stih & Schnock on
Women at Work

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Rosie Won the War

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Women on the American homefront during World War II shifted ever so briefly into roles at odds with traditional conceptions of womanhood. Taking on the jobs that men formerly occupied, these women wielded tools and operated machinery as support for the war effort against the rise of fascism in Europe as well as the threats in the Pacific. The image that most captured that period, when some women exchanged dresses for coveralls and coiffeurs for kerchiefs, was Norman Rockwell's *Rosie the Riveter*, where a muscular female twists into a powerful Michelangelo-esque position, is poised to champ on a sandwich and imperiously rests her foot (shod in worn brown loafers and accompanied by thick red socks) on Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. Both serious and playful — Rockwell's picture is important commentary

Renata Stih & Frieder Schnock,
Rosie Won the War, 2015.
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VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn/Berlin.

on what women were not only capable of, but only briefly recognized for, way back in 1943.

Roll forward to 2015, 70 years since



Renata Stih & Frieder Schnock, *Counter Attack* (film still), 2015. Video projection, 20 min. © Stih & Schnock, Berlin 2015 / Artists Rights Society, NYC.

the end of World War II, nearly a century since women gained the right to vote, and more than half a century since the rise of the women's movement in the United States. In a show

Boca's new fall show *History Becomes Memory*, which addresses anti-Semitism over different periods in Europe. Adapting elements from their highly lauded Holocaust-related memorial in Berlin that confronts the many anti-Jewish laws enacted by the Nazis, the artists reproduce some of their earlier texts as flags that reference Nazi banners in red,

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commissioned by the Boca Raton Museum of Art, Berlin-based artists Renata Stih and Frieder Schnock present a 21st-century take on working women, *Rosie Won the War*, which showcases a powerful series of portraits that recasts Rosie as a woman of today. The results brilliantly mix the ironic with the heroic.

Stih & Schnock, who are well known for conceptual art that references issues of human rights and especially the connection between Europe and America, have presented a variety of works for

black and white. But it is their latest work on women since the time of World War II that most commands your attention.

The 21 large portraits are essentially life-sized. The women presented are in fact artists, historians, curators, journalists and activists, who may use their hands, but more often utilize their minds in their current professions. Merging photography with computer-assisted image making, the artists have created individualized narratives that place these contempo-

rary women within the context of World War II. The figures reenact Rosie's costume replete with overalls, boots and tools in their hands, but in poses more reminiscent of photographer Helmut Newton's nudes.

Stih & Schnock underscore how the opening of roles beyond the home in the 1940s led the way to the greatly expanded positions in society now occupied by women such as these. Juxtaposing the gear of Rosie's time with backdrops that reference battlefields from Omaha Beach to Okinawa, the artists acknowledge the historic conditions of World War II, but also the way in which that time paved new courses for modern women. At the same time, they question gender progress up to our day.

According to Stih, she and Schnock developed this idea initially while visiting D-Day battlefields in Normandy where they considered the massive sacrifice of Americans to save Europe from fascism. This was followed by reconnecting with Norman Rockwell's iconic work of Rosie at Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Bentonville, Arkansas. Over time, working from their studio in Berlin, the two decided that a series of pictures imbued with narrative — which referenced traditional portraiture via pose and scale, not unlike great 17th-century works by Peter Paul Rubens and Anthony van Dyck, was the right direction for the show in Boca. Their goal: "Let women be heroes."

Additionally, they developed a smaller series of portraits, which are less imposing but allow the viewer a different relationship with the artworks — more like viewing a Madonna than a portrait of a monarch. A still life that features the many tools used in the portrait series is also included.

Finally, a video that stars refined women's shoes — albeit ones specially fitted with spikes — makes a show of the destruction of a copy of *Mein Kampf*. Unlike Rockwell's sensible shoes, these pairs of footwear are at once highly feminine — and capable of destruction. Killer heels, indeed — and a highly developed concept of who Rosie has become in 2015. ■

In December, following Art Basel, the artists will give a talk on their work at the Boca Museum.