

By Juan Gaitan

I first came across Sara Rajaei's work during a studio visit with her apropos the Prix de Rome exhibition. She had been short-listed for the prize alongside four other artists (two working collectively), all of which had been working in video. The competition (for this prize was clearly a competition) was hard. Rajaei, I believe, was sceptical of our visit. This may have been due to the fact that my presence there was somewhat ambiguous, for I was not in charge of the selection of the works nor was I in any way to take part in the jury's posterior decision. I was there to look at her work, more or less as a curator, but more so as a service provider: I was there because the show would take place partly at Witte de With, where I had recently taken a position as curator, and I was in charge of organizing the exhibition, nothing else. It took a while for us to be able to have a "real" conversation. The following weeks and months were all about this exhibition and all of us were doing our best to make it work out, and things for a while looked as if they were not going to work out so well. In the end, however, as always, they did, and Sara produced an installation perfectly suited to the unhurried elegance of her films.

So, on the night of the opening, which took place in two different cities - Amsterdam, where Sara's film was shown, and Rotterdam - we all went for dinner and Sarah and I talked. And I started talking about her work, which reminded me, as I told her, of a bourgeois ethos that was relatively "French" and which had travelled, both ideologically and aesthetically, to different places in the world. It was clear to me that in her films there is a commitment to women's lives, particularly in Iran, but this was not about women's "roles" in society nor about their rapport with a male culture, but about the worlds that are constructed around a particularly defined space: the home interior. These spaces, which she relates in her works, and in particular the home interior, have been for me profoundly linked to the idea of "woman," and to a configuration of this concept that is peculiar to this restricted realm. For me, this configuration has always been split between three figures of love: the stable grandmother, the unstable mother, and the unfailing maid-servant, whom characteristically would be replaceable and relatively anonymous, unlike the grandmother and the mother, who are always one and the same person, but who in my case has always been the same person.

Only recently, in a remarkable essay about the work of Cy Twombly, Jeff Wall wrote about Matisse's *The Piano Lesson*, a painting that I, too, have loved for a long time. It is a small painting set in an ambiguous space in which Matisse's son is playing the piano on a *Pleyel* piano. The word "Pleyel" appears in reverse, facing the son, who is in turn facing the viewer. There are other figures around that indicate this as a familial zone, with the sister as teacher, the father as the silent observer.

The terms in which Wall spoke of this painting were surprising and new to me: he made reference to a simple gesture, namely Matisse writing the word "Pleyel" in reverse, by which Matisse enclosed the space of depiction and made it plausible. This, of course, clearly relates to Wall's own *Picture for Women* which, because of its open reference to Manet's *Bar a la Folie Bergere*, is usually interpreted as a retrieval of an alternate *durée* within the *Longue Durée* of alienation, which we can call the alienation of woman. But this reference to Matisse was striking to me because it reminded me that the space of *Picture for Women* was not, by any stretch of the imagination, a space analogous to the *Bar*, there was only light and reflection and an absolute emptiness that I always found abysmal. There was also - and this is what made it an impossible space - a labyrinthine series of suggestions and an confusion of points of view that is thankfully pointless to unravel. And here was the explanation! Wall had managed, once again, to slip a reference, a "code" or a "secret message" in one of his writings about an other artist, without sacrificing the overall charm with which he spoke of the work. The interior was an impossible space, which is to say, in painting, the interior is a

space of depiction that would remain absolutely inaccessible to us were it not for the strange sense it produces in us, a space that we can only call "affective." Depiction happens through *affects*, to put it in Deleuzian terms. And *Picture for Women*, I realized, affected me in a way all too similar to *The Piano Lesson*.

So here we have two examples of this space that I called the "home interior," which Matisse associated with the family and which Wall associates with "woman" (perhaps because he didn't yet have his own family). Roland Barthes also made reference to this space, at least once, and called it "the private life" - "that zone of space, of time, in which I am not an image, an object." Yet, I am there, as a relatively slippery figure that composes and dissolves itself between images and objects. Sara Rajaei makes similar associations, and, like them, she brings out the affective relationship, noting that in this place entirely different economies of time and space are at work. What did I say to Sara? Something personal, and I pointed out something that I considered to reflect a characteristically "bourgeois" reference, but not in the sense of "alienation" - not the anonymous stare of the maid-servant in Manet's painting - but in the sense of a space so profoundly dedicated to itself, so invested in itself, that barely anything could exist, at least affectively, outside of it. Laughter and tears, memories, broken objects ... this "home interior" is something that I experienced as a gigantic realm, but also as a relatively melancholy and slowly eroding one, a realm perhaps too large for contemporary life, a space whose dimension were rendered unnecessary by the television set, in which other worlds were presented and are presented, intensely parallel worlds that slowly - perhaps - have been transforming this interior, removing the affective structure that for so long kept it together. Indeed, one day I saw my grandmothers house being torn down in order to make room for a residential high-rise.

So why make such a work now? What struck me most of these stories of "woman" that appeared in Sara's work was not these references to a familiar space, a bourgeois universalism, but the timing. In these works one realizes that there is no erosion, there is not this nostalgia for a moment in which they existed - and I must say I was glad to see the grandmother's house come down - but a relatively familiar horror at seeing them reconstructed, and at noting how from their former ruins a new orthodoxy, pretending to be fundamentally different, has forced this space to re-compose itself, and all those affects - memories, tears, laughter - must, once again, be staged between an empty room and a piano lesson.