

galerie bertrand & gruner

PRESS RELEASE

MUSTAFA MALUKA:
" REFLEXIVE INDICES: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY "



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MUSTAFA MALUKA

September 12 – November 3, 2007

Galerie bertrand & gruner is pleased to present the first solo show of Mustafa Maluka in Switzerland.

Born in 1976 in Cape Town, Mustafa Maluka lives and works between Berlin and Amsterdam.

Painted in 2007 (oil and acrylic on canvas), the large-format pieces on display at galerie bertrand & gruner are portraits with a monumental aspect. Maluka takes the rules of the genre at face value as it were, opting to tightly frame his subjects, cutting them off at the shoulder. Faces press forward into the foreground, occupying nearly the whole of the canvas. The head-on treatment of the subjects and their iconic immobility also link Maluka's work with the classic tradition of the portrait. But the artist's use of a very bright palette and his juxtaposition of graphic elements suggest that other influences are at work such as hip hop and graffiti. Their spirit pervades his paintings' backgrounds and the rainbow-colored clothes vibrating around the impassive faces of the subjects.

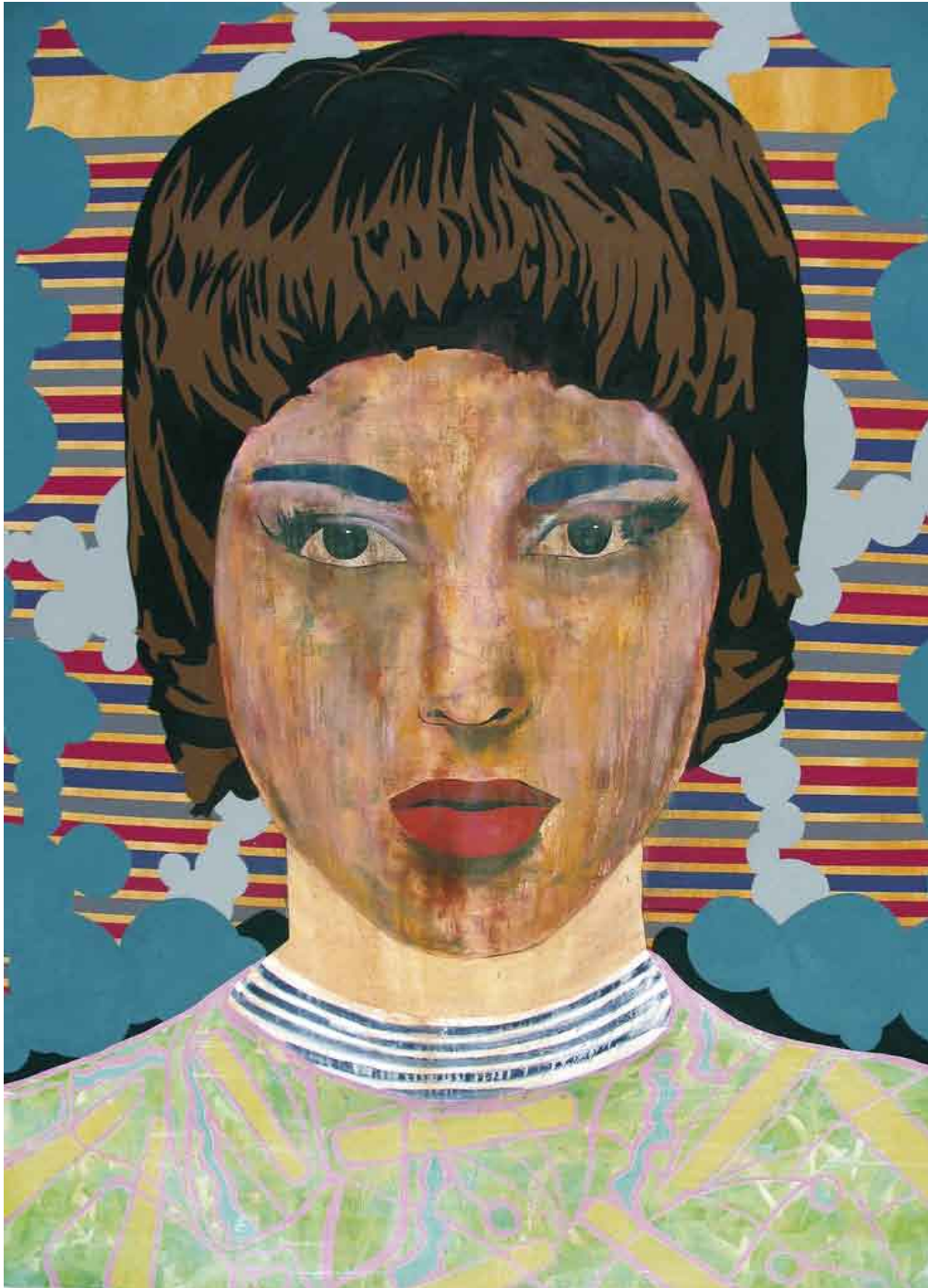
The titles chosen for these portraits also introduce a certain distance vis-à-vis the tradition. Whereas portraits are traditionally the affirmation of an individual who is named and clearly identifiable, Maluka reveals nothing of his subjects' identity. Viewers completely ignore who is represented, and that is of almost no importance. By choosing titles like "One Day It Will All Make Sense", "Memories Don't Live Like People Do", or "We Forgot How Life's Supposed to Be", the artist places the portrait on a different terrain, generating a complex reflection on identity and the idea of belonging to a particular culture or history.

We get a better understanding of Maluka's attitude if we recall that he usually works from photographs sourced from magazines or the internet. Paying no mind to the status or name of the person photographed, he selects his subjects according to the immediate complicity they create. The painted portrait conserves a trace of that complicity for it sustains the viewer's gaze without a hint of provocation or false modesty. Aware they are being watched, the subjects glance nonchalantly towards the area outside the canvas.

Drawing inspiration from a popular and banal imagery, Maluka also introduces a critical distance with respect to the portrait as celebration of heroes and the powerful. His subjects are neither kings nor popes, but rather any Tom, Dick or Harry whose sole merit is to have been able to generate a certain complicity with the artist. If he considers his portraits as "invented heroes", it is not as the celebration of a real personality who is particularly admirable but rather as the creation of an imaginary person that he wants to be able to admire.

By displacing the subject outside its original context and inserting it in a new space that is totally devoid of external references, Maluka also offers us a reflection on belonging, exile and migration. Having himself experienced life in foreign places, he is especially sensitive to minorities and the way they are perceived in the societies taking them in. How are they viewed? How do they view others? What happens in that reflexive third space?

Maluka's faces assume their full significance here. Lacking flesh and skin, they are palimpsests that appear by turns moist and dried out, laden with earth and rocky. Contrasting with the broad colorful and very pop art-like swaths of the hair and fabrics, their treatment puts viewers inescapably in mind of a fresco. Creating a dialog between different traditions and techniques within one and the same canvas, Maluka gives us truly uncommon portraits. Possessing an ambiguous identity, the subjects stand out for the fact that they defy classification.



One day it will all make sense, 2007, oil and acrylic on canvas, 183 x 133 cm

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