A General Feel for *Summerland*

by Jenifer Papararo

In a small café a young woman is reading a book. In her hands is a paperback copy of Simone de Beauvoir's autobiographical novel, *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter.* It is well used, the pages slightly curled and dog-eared, and the cover creased down the middle. She knows the book intimately. There is something so familiar about this young reader. She could be one of so many women devouring Beauvoir's books, using them as guides for her own life. She has probably read Beauvoir's reluctant but powerful feminist book, *The Second Sex,* which she can quote with little effort: "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman." But it is the French existential philosopher's autobiographies with which she identifies most, and through which she comes to define herself with confidence as a feminist, as a woman who won't let her ambitions be subsumed by those of men.

This young female reader is a common character. She is emblematic of this time of discovery; her relationship to Beauvoir's writings, reflecting the understanding of many women that a redefinition of the feminine self is in order—paramount, really. She conjures memories of my own youth and of those women who enthusiastically introduced me to Beauvoir. There is a romance in the depiction of this reader, in attempting to represent and, thus, remember that revelatory moment of one's own. Shannon Oksanen's

serial ink drawings of Beauvoir effectively capture this time as well as express the desire to evoke it. There is a naïve and uncertain quality to some of the lines in Oksanen's portraits. She has given them an amateurish quality, as if they could have been drawn by our reader, made in homage by a devoted fan. Oksanen reproduces the existentialist philosopher's portrait in celebration of Beauvoir, but also in search of a general feel for her life, the time period, and Oksanen's own understanding of it. Part of the philosopher's legend is her notorious and unconventional relationship with Jean-Paul Sartre, which was filled with love affairs and intellectual respect. Oksanen extends her interest in the philosopher's life through drawings of Sartre, rendered in the same medium with the same tentative lines. Oksanen has produced a patterned wallpaper design with repeating images of both Beauvoir and Sartre (page 6). She has also handcrafted child-like papier-mâché puppets of the two lovers and has drawn portraits of other key people from Beauvoir's intellectual and social circles, such as the writer Albert Camus or the architect Jean Pouillon.

Beauvoir is already an iconic figure. Her books are ubiquitous, and biographies and articles about her are abundant. Her photographic image is as copious as her philosophy, invariably appearing next to every text where she is mentioned. Oksanen's repetitive representations are far

from illustrations of French existential philosophy. They do not clarify existential ethics or elucidate what Beauvoir means by *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. They cannot tell us about the intimacies of her relationship with Sartre or her numerous lovers. Oksanen is, however, eliciting a feel for this historical period or, more aptly, representing a present interest in this past—a past that is linked to the artist, her identification with this historic figure and a moment of epiphany. As such, these images hold a great deal of information, but as nostalgic, not didactic, devices.

Oksanen has an interest in repeatedly representing already over-represented images. She is well known for her serial portraits of popular and historical figures. Her forty ink and paper drawings (above) of Nana Mouskouri, one of the worlds biggest selling female singers, were her first serial portraits and her first attempts to look closely at how the image of one figure has informed the pop star's representation of herself and in turn, transformed her image into a recognizable icon. Mouskouri has released over 400 albums and, according to the online magazine *HomeboyMediaNews,* two hundred and thirty of them are platinum or gold. Almost all have an image of the singer on the cover. Collectively, the original album covers and Oksanen's drawings of Mouskouri simplify a career that seems an impossibility in its

very description. She released her first album in 1960 and her last in 2007. She has produced albums in her native language Greek, but also French, Spanish, German, English and other languages. She moves freely between singing jazz, folk, pop and classical styles of music. She is an inexhaustible artist whose image has changed little in comparison to her vigorous career, but has come to mean more.

Even though I can't name, let alone hum, one of Mouskouri's songs, I remember her as a striking figure with long straight black hair, usually in shimmering evening gowns and always wearing her signature black-rimmed glasses. Oksanen's portraits are simple line drawings; they are uniform and centered headshots scaled to the dimensions of an album cover. Mouskouri is easily identifiable by the heavy glasses (even though they change in style from 1950s horn-rims to a more contemporary rectangle shape over the years), her hair, as well as a small mole on the lower left side of her face. With few lines and simple closed curves, Oksanen represents this icon as well as chronicles the making of one. What is made clear in viewing this series is the power of repetition and how this repetition begets nostalgia. In the mega-superstar's nearly forty year career her image has changed little; it is as if her image embodies

both the past and the present. Through these portraits, we can see how the past was imagined from beginning to end.

It must be a rare case to find someone who hasn't fallen victim to the romance of nostalgia and can't name it as such. Andy Warhol seemed to know this well. His silkscreen portraits, created from mass-produced photographs of celebrities such as Marilyn Monroe and Jackie Onassis, played off their subject's already iconic status, but also became part of what made them pop symbols. Warhol's silk-screens of Monroe were made shortly after her suicide in 1962 from a 1953 press photo. She was already relegated to the past; the image he used to depict her was from another time. It was with variances in colour applied off register that made his works, in their time, slip out of the tight grip of nostalgia. This is most evident in his Monroe portraits where he created a striking formal picture plane while destabilising the flawless image of this fragile movie star. Like the effects of Warhol's use of colour, Oksanen's often heavy rendering hand, with its tight turns and awkward lines, break the idyllic illusion of the calm collected personality of Mouskouri; this stylistic handling even works at unsettling the solid figures of Beauvoir and Sartre. Oksanen's at times amateurish style and her choice of subject is in keeping with the

contemporary American painter Elizabeth Peyton, who is well known for her intimate oil paintings of famous figures such as rock star Kurt Cobain or American poet Walt Whitman. Both Peyton and Oksanen tend to work from saturated media photographs, remaking images that are already so familiar. They both use a somewhat restrained, tight and awkward style to bring these images into question. In both their works there is a nostalgic proliferation that collides contemporary and historical figures. But a key that sets Oksanen apart from Peyton is the former's use of repetition.

As part of Oksanen's *Summerland,* she has embarked on a new serial portrait. This time it is of one of the most represented figures of twentieth century pop culture, Elvis Presley (pages 10, 13, 15, 16 and 17). Her source material is collected from widespread media photographs, and for this series she is working with oil paint on linen, which offers a softness that isn't present in her earlier drawings or paintings. This soft edge creates an almost perfect ground for nostalgic idealization. The image of Elvis becomes not just the symbol of the pop star but also a signal for a perfect "then" in the not so good "now." Each separate glossy oil painting of The King is an instance of present white-washed desires, which surface as Oksanen's paintings of Elvis accumulate. It is not that she has used anything other than the

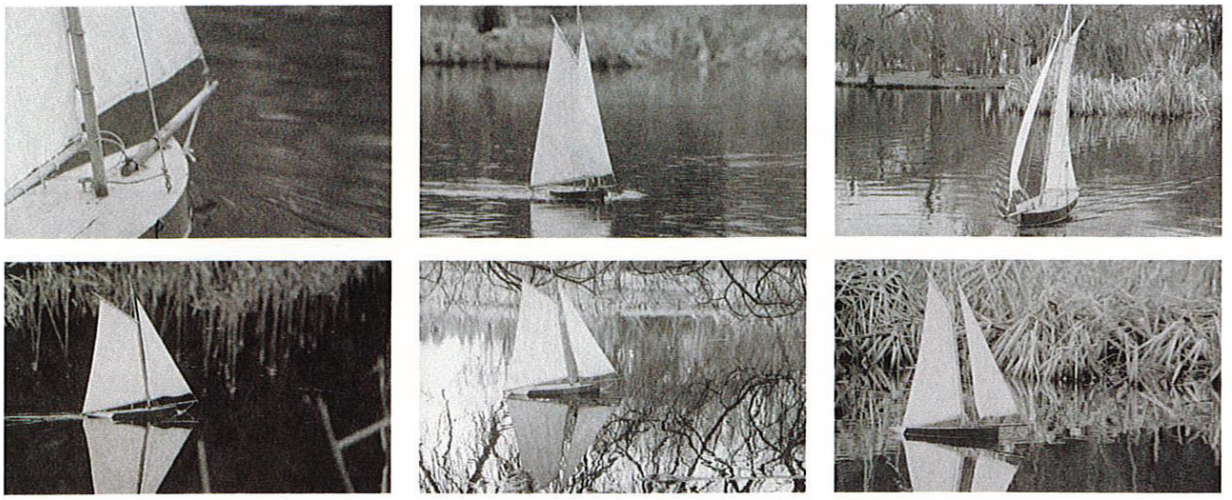
most flattering pictures of Elvis as her source material, but in her repeated representation of the icon the fantasy dissolves. Even the soft edges of the oil paintings create a rift that breaks the dream of this superstar. This rift is caused by the small variations between our Vaseline coated memories of the original images and the beautiful but imperfect recreations by Oksanen.

Reproduction and repetition cause small changes to occur over time, and it is the registration of these variations that takes Oksanen's work beyond the realm of nostalgia. Not that its effects are inconsequential to the artist: nostalgia is a useful condition. Even with its bad reputation as a degradation of the present in favour of an imaginary past, to be able to induce a nostalgic response is an incredible power and shouldn't be taken for granted. Regardless of its power and prevalence, nostalgia is still tentative. Some idealized visions may linger longer than others, but there is always a moment when they give way to present realities. They have to break at some point, and in Oksanen's work this is likely to occur in the details. Her drawings and paintings and, as we will also see, her films and videos are amplified details. The effect of their sum still rests in their parts as repeating parts. These details are no longer about subject matter, but relate more to the form in which they are presented. Repetition functions as a means of

removal. The subject matter or, more aptly, the pop cultural elements, are dulled and are deftly brought into a formal realm.

This back and forth between form and content is visible in both her earlier films: *Spins* (page 18) from 2001 and *Vanishing Point* (page 19) made a year later in collaboration with Vancouver photographer and musician Scott Livingstone. In *Spins* a static camera captures a young girl skillfully skating across a frozen mountain lake. The black and white film flickers like an old silent movie. The skater is projected life-size as she stops and starts in centre screen to perform a variety of figure-skating spins. The action is minimal, made from a static shot of a young woman repeatedly gliding across the picture plane. She could do this forever and I could watch her for just as long. Repetition and return is a way of learning material, which produces its own sort of mastery.

Oksanen's repetition of subject matter or action as formal play is a form of rote learning, but one that is focused as much on the maker as it is on the viewer. The repeated action of the skater's spinning jumps relates as much to the general quality of the film as it does to her skill. The film, with its constructed set (the lake is a skating rink and the starry sky a perforated

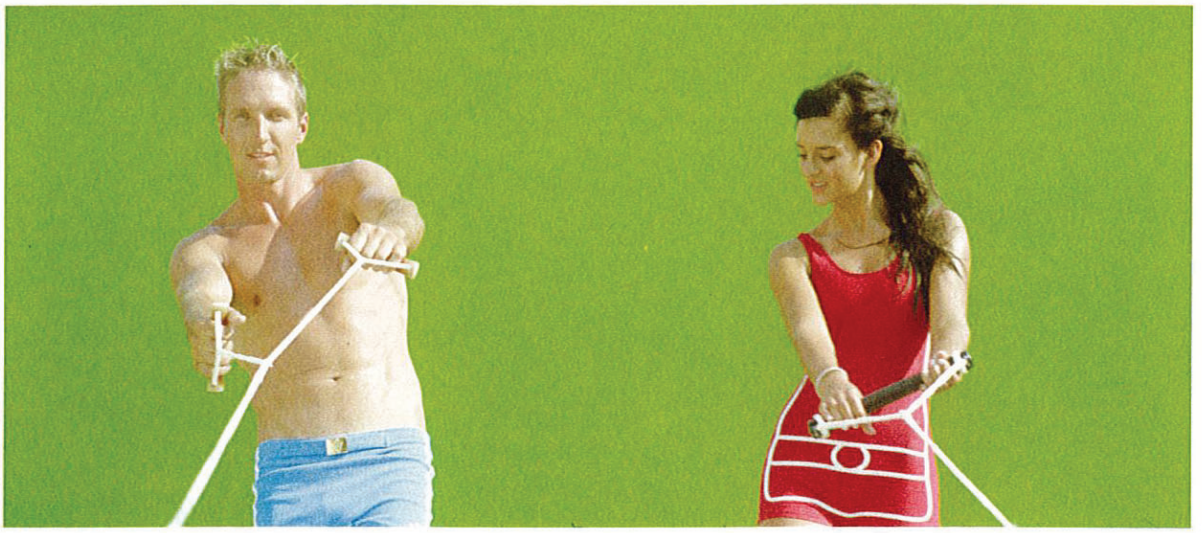


back lit sheet of black seamless) is beautiful in its fakeness. The scene is a reconstruction of an earlier time or the dream of that time. Figure-skating represents a skill, but in *Spins* it also reflects the past.

Vanishing Point is a stylized remake of a scene from the 1971 road movie of the same name directed by Richard C. Sarafian. Oksanen and Livingstone's laconic film is counter to the fast paced original, which bore the tagline, "it's the maximum trip... at maximum speed." The scene they reproduce is loosely based on a flashback sequence, where they portray, with a static shot of a shallow beach, an abandoned vintage surf board caught in the low waves as it is being pulled in and out of shore, filmed in colour super 8 with a surf music soundtrack written, recorded, and played by the artists. This short film seems to have all the wrong signifiers in relation to the original movie, yet it is an almost perfect remake, capturing the very nostalgic longing by the main character, Kowaiski, for a time when he was happily in love. But that happy memory quickly collapses, turning to one of grieving, as the viewer finds out that Kowaiski's girlfriend drowned in a surfing accident. The affect of this sentimentality, or how nostalgic identification registers, is uncertain. The filmic quality of *Vanishing Point* is so different from the original, yet it leaves a familiar flavour in one's mouth, like knowing a taste without actually having experienced it.

Little boat (above), a 5-minute black and white 16mm loop is an example of Oksanen's astonishing ability to wield nostalgic response. This simple film starts off with an establishing shot of a calm lake surrounded by old leafless trees covered in frost. A handcrafted toy sailboat is pushed off shore by a stick. The camera follows it, as it sails swiftly around the reed-filled lake. Plucky electronic music, compiled from sampled sounds from Delia Derbyshire and Daphne Oram who were part of the BBC Radiophonic Workshop, come in and out of play. The perfectly timed music and the full-steam-ahead speed of the little boat give the film a somewhat cartoon-like feel. It is familiar. I almost remember seeing this scene, but the film is more a hint at something familiar than anything real.

The evocation of an era and its stylistic definition requires a unique form of emotional calculation. Inspired to some extent by Rodney Graham's historical re-creations, Oksanen's visual cues attempt to capture the feel of a particular time. In *Summerland,* Oksanen's remake of the waterskiing scene from *Viva Las Vegas,* she puts forward a compilation of visual estimations that combine to represent this period in America just at a point when a notable shift in consciousness was occurring (Pages 22-32). The original story is a typical romance: Lucky Jackson (Elvis Presley), a



gifted race car driver, falls in love with Rusty Martin (Ann Margaret), a swimming teacher. Rusty wants little to do with Lucky because she is looking for a wealthy, educated man. Lucky is persistent, winning Rusty over—surprisingly not by singing and dancing, but in a daylong date, where he takes her flying, scooter riding and waterskiing. *Summerland* is inspired by this dating scene but captures a general feel for that era's courtship rituals and how they were represented in popular culture.

It is always sunny in *Summerland,* which is shot in 35mm, formatted to Hollywood standard Cinemascope with technichrome-like saturated colours. Two water-skiers, a buff, blonde boyish-male (Peter Viinikka), and a tall, slender, dark-haired woman (Nicole Blackmore), ski together on calm waters under a crystal blue sky. Both are wearing vintage styled swimsuits, his are short baby blue trunks and hers a cherry red one-piece with a faux belt stitched in white. They ski on vintage wooden skies, and are pulled by a pristine 1965 Glastron speed boat. Her hair is partly tied back, but still loose enough for the wind to flow through it. Water lightly splashes over the skiers, keeping them cool under the hot sun. Every now and then they glance at each other, smiling, blue eyes sparkling. *Summerland* still carries a seed of romance, but it is levelled to backdrop. The aesthetic charge is

equally as important as the relationship between the two skiers; the energy between them relating as much to waterskiing and the beauty of the scene as it does to romance.

In *Summerland,* as with all of her work, there is a compiling of like images that she uses to call to mind an era, defining it stylistically. There is an evocation of the 1960s youth culture just before it is about to turn into something else. The film is set in 1965 America at a time when the Free Speech Movement was happening in Berkeley; the Watts Riots in Los Angeles killed 34 people; Vietnam war protests started, and the Houseboat talks with Timothy Leary and Allen Ginsberg were just around the corner. In *Summerland,* the sustained action of water-skiing is its own form of resistance. It is as if Oksanen is using this leisure sport to hold that romance and naiveté in place and time. Nostalgia resides in the realm of images, and Oksanen keeps it there. In a personal reflection of how memory functions and how society at large comes together in memory, she manages to bring forward a strength and control that can only come from making and remaking images. To use water-skiing to represent a moment just before that mass public shift of consciousness is like knowing all too well that you can't be in the water without getting wet.