

## HELLO SADNESS

Charlotte Martin

**“Papa’s said to be a rather prominent Black Panther”**

So ran a sentence in the Los Angeles Times gossip column in 1970

**“cause her embarrassment and cheapen her image”**

Was the stated FBI aim.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s the FBI, then headed by J. Edgar Hoover, ran a series of smear campaigns against notable figures who supported organisations the FBI deemed subversive. These included anti-war, feminist and anti-colonial organisations, as well as the Black Panther movement. These smear campaigns came under the operation ‘COINTELPRO’.

Chosen as the winner of a Hollywood talent search at the age of 17, Jean Seberg was thrust from Iowa into the spotlight. She went on to star in many of Otto Preminger’s films, moving to Paris where she became the epitome of 60s chic, popularising the gamine pixie crop and starring in many French New Wave films.

Whilst still living in Los Angeles, Seberg met the ‘French Ambassador to Hollywood’ – award-winning novelist, intellectual and hero of the French Resistance Romain Gary. Seberg was 24 and Gary 49. Marriage quickly followed as Gary resigned from his diplomatic post and the newlyweds relocated to Paris, where they had a son and Seberg fell pregnant for a second time.

Seberg became an active supporter of the Black Panthers after a chance meeting with Hakim Jamal on a flight from Paris to Los Angeles in 1968. Upon disembarking, she gave Jamal a raised fist salute in full view of the waiting press. Seberg went on to regularly donate money to the Black Panthers as well as host fundraisers for them; the guest list included Jane Fonda, Vanessa Redgrave and Paul Newman, and the FBI was watching. They often surveilled Seberg, tapped her phone and broke into her home, all designed to intimidate her into breaking ties with the Black Panthers.

With the FBI eager to undermine the legitimacy and aims of the civil rights movement, they launched their smear campaign. With the agreement of President Nixon, the FBI fed stories to the *LA Times* that Seberg’s unborn child was not fathered by her husband, Romain Gary, but instead by a leading Black Panther. The *Times* ran with the planted gossip. Joyce Haber was then a powerful Hollywood gossip columnist, known for her acerbic commentary on the stars of the day, whilst Haber didn’t name Seberg outright, the reader was left with no doubt in their mind that Jean Seberg was the ‘Miss A’ discussed in the column. Haber’s column was syndicated in more than 100 US newspapers, with *Newsweek* actually naming Seberg.

Distraught that the accusation she was an unfaithful wife was being reprinted all over America, Seberg went into premature labour, causing her daughter to die three days later. At the funeral, Seberg presented the body of her child in an open casket. Displaying the dead body of her premature child in this way was the only option she felt was available to her to fight back against the machine of the US intelligence services and prove that she had in fact been faithful to her husband. On the subject of the funeral, Seberg said: "I began cracking up then, without knowing it... I decided to bury my baby in my hometown. We opened the coffin and took 180 photographs. A lot of them came to look".

In Fowler's series 'Hello Sadness', she depicts Seberg as Cecille in Preminger's film *Bonjour Tristesse*. Fowler, known for her drawings and sculpture, is also a collage-maker – although the finished art work is always seamless, no ripped corners of paper here, no evidence of gluing. The cutting, copying and pasting all takes place in Fowler's mind and is assembled by means of charcoal and paper. Her montage is undetectable at first glance. When working from film stills, as in this series of drawings, Fowler obsessively rewinds, forwards, pauses and cuts. Lifting different details from different stills, stitching them together on her paper. This process of montage performs several functions: it enables Fowler to manipulate the source material into something new, so she can wrestle from it the evocation she is seeking. It also turns the figure into a cipher once removed. Is Fowler asking us to look at Seberg as Jean Seberg the film-star, or through Preminger's lens as Cecille? Or, perhaps, neither? Fowler's assemblage allows access to a new meaning for the viewer, Seberg not fully as herself and not as Cecille either, yet both are visible in the final figure.

At the top and bottom of the drawings are large strips of black velvet, akin to the 'mattes' on a cinema reel. Velvet, the most luxurious of fabrics, is hot and dense, offering an extreme luxury with a dark edge, a hint of the abyss. These strips offer a complete blackness, absorbing all the light that comes into contact with it. This vacuuming of light is mirrored in Fowler's use of thick charcoal in the drawing.

The FBI's treatment of Seberg is integral to an understanding of Fowler's drawings here. Fowler has long been fascinated by the relationship between celebrity and 'gossip', a symbiotic and evolving relationship that always seems to represent the prevailing ideals and morals of the day. Gossip is unrivalled in its ability to create and reframe a narrative so simply. The effectiveness of gossip relies on our willingness to suspend logic and reason in favour of a tantalising myth. This willing suspension of truth by the spectator is what makes gossip so powerful and all of us complicit in its power. A power the FBI understood.

Fowler's Seberg is visibly distraught, smearing cream onto her face which appears to still be full of makeup. The usually calming nightly ritual of applying beauty creams becomes almost grotesque here, the cream seems to sit atop her face as she manically applies more and more, a suffocating mask, a futile attempt to apply a veneer and conceal her vulnerability. Her fraught black eyes seem to pierce the viewer, interrupting our attempt at a detached appreciation of a work of art. Instead, they seem to plead with us to not engage with the smears, rumours, half-truths and defamations of gossip and simultaneously accuse us for our inevitable collusion, holding us accountable for our collective cultural pact with gossip.

Seberg was found dead in her car in Paris after disappearing on 30 August 1979. In the press conference that followed, Gary stated that Seberg had frequently attempted suicide on the anniversary of their child's death, 25th August. The following year Romain Gary committed suicide.

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