

SONIC STRIDES

Róisín Murphy opens up on her new era of stylish, cerebral pop.

"MONSTROUSLY TALENTED!" "ANTICON-formiste artist!" "Underrated genius!" These are just three of many impassioned comments you'll find on YouTube under singer Róisín Murphy's video for "Exploitation," the first single off of her latest disc, *Hairless Toys*. Murphy is a favourite among the fashion flock (she famously sang on the runway at Viktor & Rolf's Spring 2010 show wearing a giant lampshade top and is cited as Gareth Pugh's first celeb supporter) and hard-core gallery goers (Simon Henwood painted her image for her debut solo album). She's one of the only electronic vocalists out there whose pieces seem part of a work-in-progress thesis.

Be it in short films or on album sleeves, her images are saturated with lush cultural references that stray from the Warhol-meets-Monroe icon canon so often seen in Madonna, Lady Gaga or Beyoncé's works. For example, Murphy's self-directed video to "Exploitation" tips its hat to the John Cassavetes-directed film *Opening Night*, starring Gena Rowlands, as well as an obscure '70s Japanese department store ad, which oddly features Faye Dunaway eating a hard-boiled egg.

"I never wanted to be a pop star," says Murphy, 42. "I always wanted to be Cindy Sherman," she says, noting that she has fallen in love with the New York photographer's conceptual approach. "Cindy is in everything I do," she says. *Hairless Toys* is packed with songs that draw from house, country and soul music, and all of them feature poignant metaphors. The best example is in a ballad called "Unputdownable," in which Murphy compares her real-life partner—Milanese producer Sebastiano Properzi—to an epic novel she wants to crawl in bed with. On a track called "Gone Fishing," she sings of the deep connection she has to the drag performers featured in the documentary *Paris Is Burning*. In the song, she croons about having "an uncommon sense so beautifully dressed" and an experience she describes as "a moment of realness I fear I could be fearless." Murphy says this bond she has to the costumed queens of Harlem reflects her own connection with fans. "When my audience is able to look at me and see that, in one moment, there is all this flamboyance, light, sparkle, beauty and joy yet there is also all this pain, complexity and depth, that's when my performance works. That is when we recognize each other." —Elio Iannacci



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