

'Woman shows' at the New Museum

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Much has been said about the attention recently dedicated by the art world to 'women's art'. The Saatchi recently mounted a group show featuring fourteen women artists; Pussy Riot have declared their intention to open an all women museum in Montenegro, showing only women and operated solely by women, and many solo women shows opened last year in major venues worldwide. Of course, this is just a drop in the mainly male art world ocean, as seen in the statistical report published a year ago by ARTnews. I am usually careful when using these kinds of generalized definitions, and I am especially weary of the term 'women art'.

This is why it was refreshing to see that the New Museum has dedicated its five floors, including one of its staircases, to shows by six women – Nicole Eisenman, Cally Spooner, Andra Ursuța, Gushka Macuga, Eva Papamargariti and Beatriz Santiago Muñoz – without any grand statements or burdening labels. As it is with any group of shows, whether it is produced by men, women or other sexes, some are more successful than others. I will focus on three of the shows, and I will try, in line with the artists' statements in the catalogues' interviews that accompany their shows, to leave the sex (but not the gender) behind.

To simplify things dramatically, for me, your work has also become the voice of a queer community.

No. God, no. I'm not the voice of any group of people! That's a horrifying thought. I'd never want to define a community or begin to know what the borders of that community even look like."

(From Nicole Eisenman's interview with Massimiliano Gioni and Helga Christoffersen, in the exhibition catalogue).

First and foremost stands Nicole Eisenman's excellent retrospective, one of the rare painting shows proving that figurative painting is still relevant today. Including twenty-two paintings and three sculptures, the show demonstrated Eisenman's impressive painting skills. The American artist, now over fifty years old, moves seamlessly between various painting styles, cultural references and historical periods. The paintings, which usually depict single characters against a flat background or condensed multi-participants scenes, are full of black humour, peaked with minor horrors or pathetic moments of grace. Some realistic, other comic-like, they are all wallowing in a kind of attractive ugliness.

In line with its dismantled title, 'Al-ugh-ories', the show offers parodist and extreme versions of flattened allegories, as if a child is being taught how to pronounce the word and its meaning. For example, a painting depicting a morbid male character in a bolero hat feeding a helpless, terrified, naked woman squeezed in chains, her head covered with a bandage, which is called *Commerce Feeds Creativity* (2004). For Eisenman, this over-simplified portrayal of the power relations between industry and artistic freedom as patriarchal control is just another symbol among the archetypes filling her works. Skeletons and death angels repeat, as in *Biergarten at Night* (2007), in which a condensed bar scene centers around a skeleton firmly kissing one of the human figures. In a different work, a lumpy, red-nosed woman sits for an intimate night cup with the angel of death (*Death and the Maiden*, 2009).

Numerous references and influences were mentioned in relation to Eisenman's style, from the rough earthiness of the new objectivity or the German grotesque of the early 20th century, through Munch, Picasso, Brueghel, Van Gogh, Gauguin and Bosch. All of these influencers, mainly the fathers of modern art, are of course, male. In the interview accompanying the show Eisenman agrees with the distinction that she "killed the father figure but not the grandfather". As if in an allegory of herself, the artist acknowledges these names in her own paintings: in two paintings of intimate couple scenes, piles of books are seen next to the beds, their exposed spines reveal their content: Brueghel, Goya, Munch, Picasso, Van Gogh, Ernst, Dürer and Matisse, along side Emily Dickinson and Homer's Iliad.

Interestingly enough, this theoretical syllabus appears in paintings depicting an enflamed corporal desire. One depicts a sex scene in a graphic, symmetrical and even schematic manner: two hairy heads, one is immersed between the other's thighs, their fingers strongly interlocked (*Is it so*, 2014). In the other, an androgynous half-naked couple is lying on the bed, illuminated by a giant projector, as if they were on a set (*Night Studio*, 2009). Eisenman's graphic treatment of surfaces is breathtaking. With the same technique – oil on canvas – she manages to create endless patterns and surfaces: the blue background is covered with white dots, as if it was a shining marble or a starry night sky; the yellow blanket covering the bed is made of small warp and woof stitches, and the exposed bodies, one yellow and the other pinkish, are filled with gentle engravings, to create a skin-like transparency. Alongside her meticulous figurative care, Eisenman uses any painterly plot as a mini abstract masterpiece.

The society depicted in the paintings, although it cannot be pinned down to any specific time or place, is a society under crisis. In *Coping* (2008), morbid characters move indifferently inside a brown liquid that has flooded their town. *The Triumph of Poverty* (2009), a current version of a mid-sixteenth century painting by the same title by Hans Holbein, was created in reaction to the 2008 financial crisis. It depicts a parade of the less fortunate, but instead of vigor and protest, Eisenman's victorious poor seem passive and depressed. The only work giving away any clues of locality is *Tea Party* (2011), in which a bored group of men is sitting in a basement, one is cradling a shot gun, the other is fixing a dynamite bomb, the other looks like a defeated version of Uncle Sam, with thorn white and red striped pants and a blue jacket. The title refers to the historical catalyst for the American War of Independence, 'The Boston Tea Party', as well as to the wave of conservative demonstrations that took place across the US six years ago.

The broken American dream returns again in one of the most heart-rending paintings in the show, where the American comic hero 'Thing' reads with desperate eyes a letter opening with the words 'Dear Obscurity'. The title of the work, *From Success to Obscurity* (2004), suggests the rest – humanity savour is redundant, fired, replaced. The artist persona is also not spared: *In Progress: Real and Imagine* (2006) an artist is seen in his studio, trying helplessly to paint with an archaic quill pen, while his studio is stranded in a storm at sea; a creative Noah's Ark. A different work depicts a monster-artist, with hairy long claws hands, staring at his canvas; a full moon shines through the window (*Were-artist*, 2007). Even though Eisenman is well established in the art scene, she often chooses a cynical, reflexive stand towards this world, which she had stormed into after displaying in the 1995 Whitney Biennale a mural, in which the museum is collapsing after what seems like a bomb attack, while she sits calmly up above, painting the horror scene. In her current paintings, it seems like the results of that horror seeped outside of the museum's walls, and that she, the artist, is now also inflicted, like any other of her Don Quixote-like anti-heroes.

I don't necessarily project myself into the categories that are attached to my artistic practice, but I recognize the necessity of the process of categorization in attempting to apply a structure or system to the gathering of historical material.

(From Goshka Macuga's interview with Margot Norton, in the exhibition catalogue).

Polish artist Goshka Macuga's heavy researched, detailed show, 'Fabric as Time' stands in strong opposition to Eisenman's immediate painting, stands. It includes five huge, impressive black and white tapestries, which are based on photo-collages. Tapestry was considered a status symbol, luxury commodities commissioned by the wealthy, usually depicting mythological tales or religious narrative – the essence of institutional power. Machuga appropriates this genre as a critical tool: in reaction to commissions by various institutions and invitations to residences at different foundations, she researched the archives and histories of her hosting foundations, eventually producing works that can be defined as institutional critique. Machuga belongs to a new wave of institutional critique, which instead of critiquing forms of display or processes of categorization, draws lines between an institution's history to wider cultural, political and historical trajectories.

The first tapestry she created, *On the Nature of the Beast*, was done in response to her 2008 Whitechapel show, which revolved around the display history of Picasso's famous *Guernica*. The original work was displayed for three weeks between 1938-39 at the London gallery, in an attempt to arise support for the Republican cause during the Spanish Civil War. As a dubious gesture to this historical moment, Machuga included in her 2008 show a tapestry version of the famous piece (commissioned by Nelson Rockefeller in 1955). The tapestry is usually displayed outside the UN Security Council chambers in Washington. In the current tapestry, Prince William is seen giving a speech on the backdrop of the *Guernica* tapestry as it was displayed at the Whitechapel show, in front of an artsy crowd photographed during the opening of the show. Also displayed is a cubist bronze torso statue of US Secretary of State Collin Powell, waving an anthrax test tube. Powell had a complex relationship with Picasso's masterpiece – in 2003, while giving a speech justifying the US military invasion to Iraq the tapestry was covered with a curtain. Machuga cleverly reveals power and status structures, political and military interests and display conventions through the fascinating, complex and bloody history of a masterpiece with one clear message. She weaved a carpet around the aura of an artwork that was itself duplicated as a tapestry – a sarcastic remark on medium translation and duplication.

Dislocation and the art world's global ambitions lay in the heart of a different piece, *Of what is, that it is; of what is not, that it is not*. In response to her invitation to dOCUMENTA 13 in 2012, Machuga displayed two carpets in the two locations of the show that year – Kassel, Germany and Kabul, Afghanistan. Included in the current show is the tapestry displayed in Kassel, which is based on a photograph taken by Machuga during a research trip to Kabul, organized by the dOCUMENTA staff. It includes over one hundred culture figures: dOCUMENTA's artists and curators, Afghan artists and intellectuals, journalists and foreign embassy and NGO representatives working in the city, all standing in front of the ruins of Kabul's Darul Aman Palace. Into the photograph, Machuga inserted homeless and Taliban figures sleeping in the heavy snow, as well as a giant orientalist snake, distorting the scale (the tapestry displayed in Kabul shows a different group of people, standing in front of the Orangerie in Kassel during a ceremony in which Machuga was given a prize, but it is not included in the current show as the artist specified that the two carpets will never be shown together). Through the European architecture of the demolished palace, the familiar format of the group photograph, the dislocation of the opposite display of the two carpets and the absurd collagist juxtapositions, Machuga criticises dOCUMENTA's colonialist act of curating an art event in a city under foreign military control.

A different work centres on an artist rather than an institution – the Czech photographer Miroslav Tichý, known for his 1960s-80s photographs of naked and half-naked women, who were unaware that they are being photographed. Machuga created a riverbank scene, in which naked and half-dressed women, some taken from Tichý's works and some from other photographs, are gathering in front of Karl Marx's tombstone. Unlike other tapestries, this one extends onto the floor, its lower part depicting a picnic blanket. These functions as a set for a performance, in which two women wearing nude bodysuit suits, designed according to Tichý's drawings, sit on the blanket/carpet, read magazines and relax. This picnic scene references one of Tichý's works, but also Manet's famous *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (1862–1863), which suffered harsh feminist critique due to its depiction of fully dressed men sitting along side a naked woman. At first glance, it seems that the work, as well as its title – *Death of Marxism, Woman of all Land Unite* (2013), which paraphrases the well-known communist slogan – is a bit too simplified, and that the connection to Marxism is loose. However, the incorporation of live performing bodies, mounted with Tichý's drawings, along side the flat collage, may trigger some kind of critical discomfort in the viewer. He is gazing at women who function as if they are hidden behind a fourth wall, the same wall that was so crucial for Tichý to create his hiding photographs. In this relation, Marx's phrase that being dictates consciousness resonates strongly.

Another work related to a performative act is *Preparatory Notes* (2014), a set for a play written by Machuga, based on an unpublished 1896 script by German art historian Aby Warburg. The set includes life-size cardboard cut-outs of political and art figures such as Marcel Duchamp as Rose Sélavy, Marina Abramović with a snake round her neck, Angela Merkel, Andrea Fraser and Russian entrepreneur Dasha Zhukova scandalously sitting on a chair version of one of Allen Jones's misogynist sculptures (a video documentation of the performance, that took place in the 8th Berlin Biennale, is screened in the museum theatre). These two last works stress the performative quality in Machuga's panoramic, real life-size tapestries, which create mesmerising human environments.

But Machuga's historical aestheticisation also raises some ethical questions. Through her textile translation of multiple historical anecdotes into a monumental two-dimensional carpet, she flattens various political implications and historical periods into a unified surface and creates a formal uniformity. This uniformity, accompanied by the obsessive research, shares a kind of 'autistic' impermeability. In a similar way to the historical production of tapestry, Machuga sends her digital images to craftsmen in Flanders, Belgium (the historical production center of this craft). Meaning, just like the institutions that commission her, she in turn commissions craftsmen to generate works that criticize the first actor in this production line. And what about the intermediate factor? The craftsmen? It seems like Machuga hasn't dedicated the same meticulous attention to the institution she herself is taking part in.

I don't see myself as a feminist artist, or even as a female artist. I am free to make a feminist work in the morning and a misogynist work in the afternoon.

(Andra Ursuța's interview with Massimiliano Gioni, in the exhibition catalogue)

Romanian artist Andra Ursuța's show can certainly be described as combining misogyny and feminism into an explosive psychologist mixture of sport, sex, death and nationalism. She has turned the space into an indoor climbing arena, covering it with white rock-climbing walls. They are covered with numerous handholds in the shape of colorful penises, in different sizes and erection phases. Their immediate humorist effect is abrupt with the discovery of morbid, pale skeleton fossils, submerged in the walls between the cheerful willies. The work is titled *Alps* (2016), after the European mountain range, which now stands as a natural barrier for immigrants on their way to Western Europe.

The climbing walls are in fact a spatial development of an earlier series of sculptures called *Whites* (2015), which are scattered between the walls. These anthropomorphic bodies resemble sharp obelisks, consisting of geometric shapes. Some are imprinted with skeletons or teeth, as if they are macabre fossils, most of them are punctured by physiognomic openings such as nostrils and eye sockets. They sit comfortably on colorful chairs, some of minimal modern design, others are more classical in style, but all seem like models, play chairs. Behind the walls, against their scaffolding, lie broomsticks with protruding tongues instead of brushes (*Floor Licker*, 2013-14).

Between all these amputated body parts, whole feminine bodies appear: two life size, identical dark marble sculptures in the shape of head-covered Roma women, wearing safety vests adorned with ornaments made of coins. The women, who look sideways with contempt, are made after a newspaper photo of a Roma woman deported from France. Called *Commerce Exterieur Mondial Sentimental* (2012), and standing on wheeled platforms, these women become currency-adorned commodities, a serial duplicated merchandise, much like the sculptures themselves, which were made in China per order.

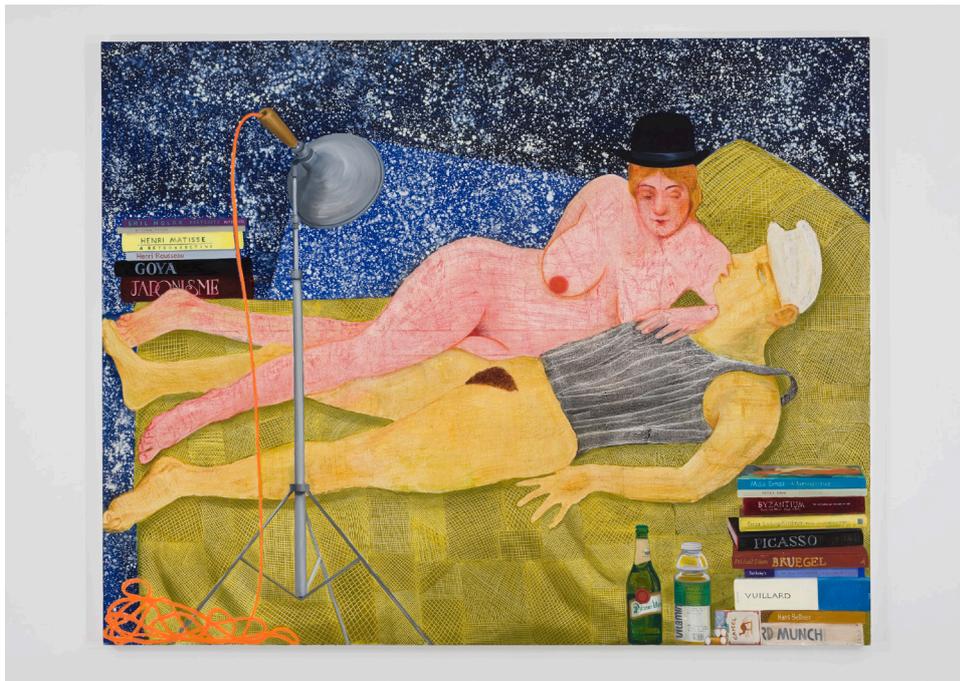
Two other feminine, headless torso sculptures appear between the walls. Made of bronze and steel, they seem like primitive or science fiction figures, with pointy breasts (*Conversation Table*, 2015-16). They are also adorned with coins attires, but instead of folklore costumes these look like indigenous jewelries. Mounted on pedestals, they are exhibited as a kind of distorted classic European colonialist art. Also included is a huge concrete sculpture, a hybrid of a national monument and a basketball backboard (*Scarecrow*, 2015). A comical image of a spread-wings eagle, resembling an inflated plastic toy, is imprinted on the board. The European heroic national symbol is turned to a graduate sports team's infantile mascot.

The entire installation could be summarized as just another show dealing with the current immigrant crisis, as seen more and more recently. One can also declare that Ursuța compares between xenophobic European nationalism to self-indulged patriarchy, or between the post-modern immigrant to the modern European explorer, Caspar David Friedrich's sublime 'wanderer', challenged by colorful cocks. But Ursuța's aesthetic is much more complex. She systematically dilutes this solemn subtext with comic, absurd, visceral and abject pauses, as well as intimate, personal insights and formal reflections. In a hidden corner, as if left to rot, lies *Crush* (2011): a gray female figure, a deflated distorted corpse, terrifyingly realistic. It is covered with drops of white wax, which resembles semen. Ursuța mentioned that it was created after her own figure, in response to her previous crashing romantic relations. Suddenly, this entire monumental installation shrinks to an intimate, personal footnote.

If there is a general statement to be made about these three 'women shows', it is the fact that they all escape any categorization or definition, thus succeeding in whispering the major and shouting the minor.



Nicole Eisenman
"Is it so", 2014



Nicole Eisenman
"Night Studio",
2009



Nicole Eisenman
"From Success to Obscurity", 2004

Nicole Eisenman
"Coping", 2008





Nicole Eisenman
"Commerce Feeds Creativity", 2004



Andra Ursuta, "Alps, 2011

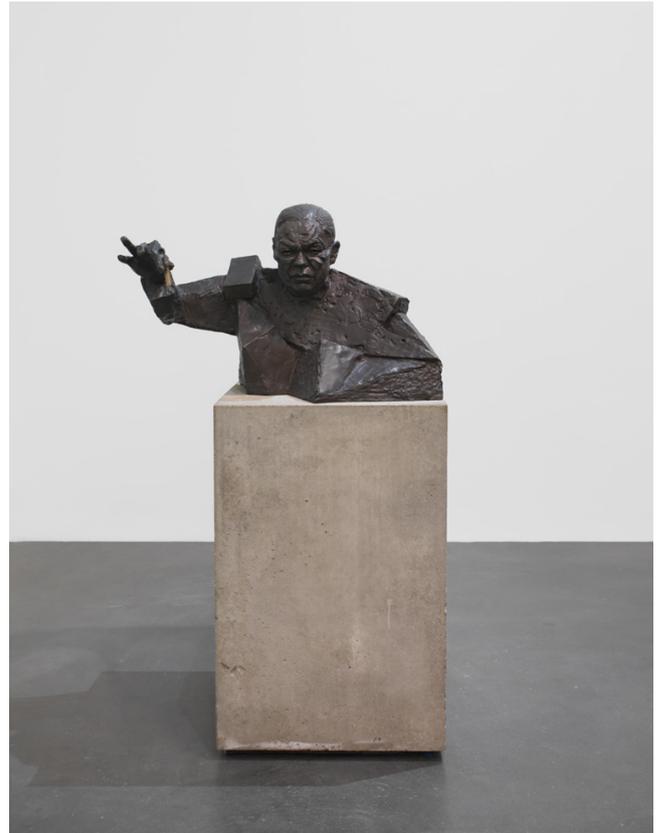


Andra Ursuta, "Crush",
2011





Andra Ursuta, "Commerce Exterieur Mondial Sentimental", 2012



Gushka Macuga "Colin Powell", 2009



Gushka Macuga "On the Nature of the Beast", 2009