

Athena Papadopoulos

with
Samuel
Leuenberger



Samuel Leuenberger **Over the summer you spent time between your studio and home, preparing for various shows including the group show *Streams of Warm Impermanence* that opened at DRAF in London on last September. Last time we spoke, you told me you were breeding various foods like zucchini and oddly enough, mangoes! You were also learning how to make the perfect pie – which I am told is quite a difficult task because the underneath stays raw. You’ve been re-decorating your flat with new pink, leopard-print chaise longues and reading autobiographies by Niki de Saint Phalle, books by Chris Kraus and looking at *The Secret Art of Dr. Seuss*. Having said that, I could as well be standing in one of your environments. There is a fluidity between the various elements you incorporate in your work, from fashion, art history to pop culture... everything seems to ebb and flow, getting contaminated with other references from dark recesses to exhilarating images sprung from celebratory memories.**

Athena Papadopoulou **I have also been pot-planting species with inspiring names like “Mother-in-Laws Tongue” and “Hens and Chicks.” You see, I am a Gemini sign and my horoscope tells me I crave variety, it is true though – sometimes I also think that might inform this tendency I have towards wanting to work using a variety of mediums and could explain my boredom with ordering the same cocktail twice in a row.**

SL **I was blown away when I first encountered your work in London, installed in a suite at the Landmark Hotel, in October 2014, during Frieze. Emalin, a**

nomadic exhibition project, which opened as a proper gallery in London last September (directed by Leopold Thun), rented a hotel room, a short walk from Regent’s Park. The hotel employees weren’t aware of what was happening three floors above, the newsletter simply announced: “just come straight up to room 320.” It felt exciting because it invited you to behave badly.

AP **And boldly so! The artworks arrived in a large van disguised in furniture covers. Before bringing them to the room we asked the hotel staff to remove the furnishing from our suite that would not fit. I think they were confused to say the least.**

My favourite part of the set-up period had to be when a procession of bellhops came with their golden trolleys to collect our truckload of “furniture,” not to mention that during the install I had to have fake coughing fits to cover up the sound of drilling.

SL ***HONEYMOON IN PICKLE PARADISE* was an immersive installation that included everything from large, hand-stitched pillow formations, customized *his-and-hers* pyjamas and rose-petal covered bed sheets, resin-based ashtrays, and even your own photo-collage shower curtain. You placed little dill pickles into the soap dish, scattered them on the shower floor and hid them on the receiver or the telephone in the toilet. Performances were held at regular intervals, cult-like events where butter and a strange drink were made, and passed through a tiny hole cut into. Another evening you hosted a ventriloquist artist who sang a Marilyn Monroe love song on repeat. The exhibition culminated with a tableau by an artist cou-**



The Great Revel of Harry Harry Who: Orgy at the Onion Cellar, installation view, Natural Instincts, Les Urbaines, Lausanne, 2015 Photo: Gina Folly (p. 131)
Installation at Frieze New York, 2016 (detail) Photo: Marcell Lind Hansen (opposite page)

ple; they re-performed the romance leading up to their wedding night that was narrated by you. I also loved how you filled the bathtub full of Champagne for party guests to wet their beaks. This show triggered a larger public reaction. I think it did so because it effectively and playfully elicited ideas around gender relations – sexism, human relationships and the environments they are socially performed within. Sexuality runs deep in your work, certainly because the body, its parts and extensions, its fluids are so ahm, in-your-face. Things are protruding and elsewhere, gaping holes are ripped open. For instance, your grandmother had her gangrenous legs amputated, as a result of her very bad diabetes; these kinds of anecdotes inform your color palette – a somewhat morbid yet radiant tone.

AP And imagine if these amputations could go off and have their own autonomy where they could attend parties – drink, dance, maybe even flirt a bit.

Well... I watch a lot of films and trashy television shows such as *The Real Housewives* and *Bachelor in Paradise*, I am compelled by the character demographics, not just because they represent a stereotypical versions of a kind of North American but also because I actually know/have met people with similar traits; through a process of ‘character development’ I can enrich the autobiographical beginnings of my drawings of young women drinking liquor at bars and clubs, cavorting or being hit on by sleazy men. The drawings get scanned and turned into DIY patches sewn to surfaces and stained with hair dyes, lipstick, red wine, and Pepto-Bismol. Things that are used to temporarily transform

ones’ skin or ones’ stinking, overindulged intestines (Swift’s *The Lady’s Dressing Room* comes to mind here).

I apply the same logic to my works: they are personified through their use of these things – humans use this stuff on their bodies, and when my works use them I certainly think the substances do their job in helping them look all dolled-up and ready to go.

These substances are slathered over images of decomposition, debauchery and depictions of narcissistic behavior. But these dyes also cover over some of the more celebratory and adorable imagery; everything is treated the same way, there is no hierarchy because for my purposes, I see no distinction.

I also transplant elements of my works by re-stitching imagery from one “body” of work to the next, to some extent living my dream of being a plastic surgeon – a profession I was adamant about pursuing as a child.

SL You are in the midst of preparing for a solo show at Shoot the Lobster in NY at the beginning of November, where you create a scene that uses a butcher shop as its starting point. You know, I am actually the son of a butcher.

AP Ha! I love to hear about other people’s parents’ professions. My father is a furrier, my sisters and I also used to help in the factory pulling staples from pelts. This will be my first collaboration with Monster Coat Club where I am creating a series of fur coats that will be “modeled” at the opening in the meat fridge-cellar-butcher-shop-fur vault-inspired installation. So in a way I guess this exhibition could be seen as somewhat of homage to both of our fathers. I imagined these new hanging carcass

Installation at Frieze New York, 2016 (detail), *Gangrene Blues (The Shitmyseemy Song)* I, IV, V, 2015 Photo: Marcell Lind Hansen (opposite page)



sculptures as the sustenance that might be eaten at one of my imagined lavish/debaucherous occasions. I was thinking a little bit about Greenaway's *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife and Her Lover* and thought of the idea of our absorbing the traits of the things that we visually and experientially consume, I also thought about a pigeon eating a chicken wing. Not so simple as saying "you are what you eat," more like a self-cannibalization(-ish).

SL You once had a tutorial with Joseph Kosuth, he told you to see a psychiatrist. Why haven't you seen one yet?

AP But I would if I could. I always dreamed of being a bit like a Woody Allen character. I attended a free psychiatry session run by resident students from UBC. They had to film it because of their lack of official qualification, in case something went wrong. Well I just went on and on, retracing everything from my past that had upset me because I thought that this is what you were supposed to do. That poor student probably needed to see his own psychiatrist after that. Now if I could only get my hands on that video. Oh and I don't really want my head to be screwed on too tightly anyway and well, I do have a bit of an outlet already – be it through focusing attention purely on my art making, or by hanging out with friends or people I don't really know whom I drink wine with and cry to – a real cathartic experience every time.

SL Tell me something about your admiration of the legendary Greer Lankton who worked in the 1980s in the East Village and why her work interests you so much.

AP It really was love at first sight. I am fascinated by and probably to some extent nostalgic for the NY art/literary scene of the '80s/'90s. Via literature and art I have followed various people from that scene, building over the years my familiarity with different key players (Kathy Acker, David Wojnarowicz, Peter Hujar, Paul Thek, etc.).

I encountered the work of Nan Goldin when I was really very young because I started out being quite in love with the photo-conceptualism and the Vancouver School. I was trying to find some lady artists who were more enriching to my purposes, obviously Cindy Sherman was a fave but it turned out I had a more visceral connection to the rawness of Nan's work – attracted by the autobiographical quality. As an aside my first painting made at age 14 after my aunt had passed away was a portrait of her holding a coffee cup in front of her face to obscure it (you can take from that what you will).

Greer's sculptural figures seem to be receptacles that have been invested or rather supersaturated with all of the stuff in her vicinity (cerebral, physical, etc.). You know, the uncomfortable elements of life, her emulations, dreams, all of which is conflated into these forms of hers. That is what makes much of her work so powerful. I was also curious about their handmade and very precise quality, but what really is of appeal is the explicit nature of her subject matter. Her works exude a sense of subjectivity forming and the transformations the work goes through in that process. I also like how the faces of many of the figures look really caked-on.

SL Likewise, you also use autobiographical elements as a point of depar-

Thong Thongs and Hose Beasts, 2016 (detail) Photo: Mariell Lind Hansen (opposite page)



ture. But straight up auto-B gets old, fast! The media keeps writing about the gigolo lifestyle of your father, the party scene you were surrounded with when you grew up but I see your interest as being more entangled with a commonly shared human experience. We fall in love, we fall out of love, we celebrate, we get drunk, we cry and mourn loss, we indulge, we seek attention and appreciation, yet most of all, we still want to protect a sense of privacy. It's the maddening dichotomy in all things, the fine balance between feeling saturated but fulfilled, between feeling at once challenged but also overwhelmed.

AP I appreciate your saying that thing about autobiography and the limitations it can bring when it is not being used to open onto something larger. I have started to struggle with this singular salacious "headline" that has somehow over-attached itself to my work. This reading is starting to haunt me a little bit. What I will say is that I am interested in various portrayals, e.g. representations of the figure of the patriarch /father from Janey's dad (*Acker's Blood and Guts in High School*) to Raymond (Sagan's *Bonjour Tristesse*), Tony Soprano, Fred Flintstone, and beyond. One thing that struck me growing up were the women – external to my family – who surrounded me: they were young and needy of male (and female) attention. I guess you could say I was precocious and so misidentified with this tendency. I quickly learned that such a woman would be at the mercy of the inevitability of being relegated to the status of a fleeting object of affection. I worried that after those surfaces faded – what would they have to maintain a

sense of exuberance? To keep their curiosities aflame?

I like to put these kinds of characters into new settings where they are able to push up against new stimuli. These images and the substances that they are soaked and smothered in fill up my imagined world with sentimentality, with love, with a kind of intriguing merriment that also rots them to the core in the most exciting way.

SL Talking about women vs the overly present father figure in your work. Tell me something about your mother, what does she mean to you, to your work?

AP My mother was kind of a trophy wife – blonde, tanned and very fit. But she is more of a reclusive figure now since their divorce and does not really fit into any of the subjects I am interested in broaching at the moment. My mother's mother had more of an interesting and boisterous past and dated a lot of different men – the grandmother who later suffered from extreme diabetes.

SL We have to wind up this conversation, it's getting late and we still need get some food. What are you eating tonight?

AP Capers and cherry pie since I will be getting home late and it is the only thing I can eat before bed that does not give me nightmares.

Slither Me Timbers! A Septic Twist on the Rocks, 2016 (detail) Photo: Mariell Lind Hansen (opposite page) All images Courtesy: the artist and Supporico Lopez, Berlin

