

Fragile

Alexandra Lazar

In her 1998 essay *Body and the East*, Slovenian art theorist Zdenka Badovinac warned that *the idea of the united Europe rests primarily on the Western definition of being European*, which was politically and economically institutionalised in the EU. The position of power, which *endeavours to hide the cultural logic of multinational capital* has deeply stereotyped and folklorised the art from the Other Europe. Thus female artists from the East have always had a concurrent task - to avoid being ascribed the representational role of the eastern artist, and to call into question the inequality of patriarchy as a way out of the traps of exotic intersectional otherness.

The group of artists currently presented under the joint title *Fragile* have taken unique paths in balancing their multiparte identities, positions and ambiguities. The iconoclastic power of their work is its openness to vulnerability (Rajkowska), orchestrated failure (Markiewicz), misremembering (Kutera), or startling grotesquerie (von Freyburg). They choose to challenge the ideology of the visible (Güler Ates), or to play with invisibility and disappearance (Popova). All are critical of their otherness, of their identity being constructed through artificially confined representations or contexts.

The burgeoning antagonism to patriarchy which underlays the deconstructive strategies of Louise Bourgeois' work such as *The Destruction of the Father* (1974) underpins the iconography of Joanna Rajkowska's video work *My Father Never Touched Me Like That* (2014). Abstracted from their bodies, the two oval forms of their calm faces are further mirrored by their touch, exploring each other's form, alone yet intertwined in an inversed double portrait. Their relationship severed in Rajkowska's early life, the emotion feels equally abstract – woven and plucked from the folds of their faces, it plays itself in fleeting illusions of expressions moulded and creased into smile, discomfort, frown. As her fingers search for familiarity and comfort with almost musical symmetry, they simultaneously disperse and deconstruct, reducing soft form to malleable tissue: a condensed learning and memorising, teasing and releasing. Regression, desublimation, abjectness: her subject absent yet forever present in echo of their features, stamped in bodily loss, in imaginaire of entwined and conflicting emotions just below the surface of soft living tissue – connecting us again to Bourgeois' soft and stuffed forms or Hepworth's maternal ovals – but with gentle urgency of this moment, present time above all else.

This is a different yet kindred journey from Anna Kutera's fractal and fractured facial compositions. Created from images from glossy magazines, Kutera's *POST Newspaper Love* (2010) evoke the foremothers of feminist portraiture: Hannah Höch's postwar post-dadaist opus, Deborah Kass' *Camouflage*, Sanja Iveković *Personal Cuts*, or more recently Katrin de Blauwer's elusive works. The ruins of Capitalocene can be traced on their crumpled smiles, consumerist glee still rosy on their cheeks.

I am again reminded of Badovinac who, reflecting on body in modernism, reminds that the Western art has mainly presented itself to the isolated East via reproductions in magazines and books, while the East responded with its documentations and myths of snatched performances and suffering dissidents. Kutera, well versed in this dialogue, remains aware of ideological interpretations that helped preserve the frontiers of the visible, and undermines the waning, glossy, representative economy captured within. Their state of mind nameless, Kutera's *POST Faces* float against the dark background like shimmering sunsets, pouting into the world of environmental destruction, mass extinction, climate change, wars and

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social disintegration, global migrations of human and other-than-human kind. Their work of making trouble is not yet done.

Femininity, beauty and vibrant sexiness ooze from Anne von Freyburg's textile paintings and sculptural wall pieces. Intent on resurrecting the excesses of the 18th century Rococo art with their oversaturated palette of colours and fabrics, von Freyburg simultaneously undermines the frivolous compositions by Boucher and Fragonard and makes them more camp in the process. Her Post-Rococo feminine body is iconoclastic in its metamorphosis from something beautiful into something ugly and back again, in a maze of soft tensions, decorative uncertainties, shiny recesses and swaying fringes in obvious dare to bourgeois taste, folk, high and outsider art, and the constructs of female identity. Her alleged key theme is indulgence, however she has transformed it into something more virulent and aggressive that goes beyond parodic role-playing and reviving the exaggerations of the genre: von Freyburg plays with a heightened sense of short, blinkered attention span within an open, nonlinear and observer-dependent system that besides obvious visual pleasure delivers a snappy commentary about self-indulgence. This is Linda Nochlin's *The Body in Pieces* in its vampire form: no anxieties, no fascination with the ideal, just a generous helping of toxic femme transcending, morphing, dancing.

Malgorzata Markiewicz dances, too. Badly. She juggles with abandon, performs a set of traditionally female chores in cute cheesecake outfits, records her frustration at the constraints suddenly imposed by married life. Her other work — the soft, stretched, stuffed body-like forms in clumsy stitch and knit — similarly reframe tropes of feminist art history with a close focus on exhaustion and failure to continually succeed as a wife, a mother, an artist.

There's an intricate conversation that takes place within a circle of female artists from the East who go through those moves and engage with the body of work with female artists before them. The cleaning motif is frequently diarised by the artists arriving from the East because it is what they do to survive, like for example Natalia Mali in her *Self-Portrait as a Cleaning Girl* (2007) whom I had a chance to curate shortly after her arrival to the UK from Dagestan, or in her series *Artist must be Flexible* that obviously riffs on Marina Abramovic's *Artist Must Be Present*, and so on. This is the conversation that remains largely invisible in the West (unless it takes place at the art colleges where it's quickly substituted with an "individual voice"), but there is a need for it among the artists themselves. It's a necessary rite of listening and echoing, of transitioning as a collective body and of being recognised as such, which forms an important basis for their creative innovativeness and as an ever-present substratum of their art. It is important to see each other fail, publicly, at juggling all these roles while calibrating own desire for success, and to maintain the mutual recognition that links these familiar storylines into a wider narrative. Markiewicz's tablecloths, confetti'd in space as a remnant of her performance at the Photographer's Gallery in London in 2018, are staking a claim at belonging in both worlds, East and West, in a clumsy flux that denotes strength.

Invisibility, which forms a large subcurrent at this exhibition, takes a specific higher poetry in the work of Güler Ates. Series of photographic portraits depict a veiled figure shielded from view (a glimpse of heroic Caspar David Friedrich a mere afterthought) that inhabits a sequence of European interiors. The figure, feminine in appearance, also appears to be carefully neutral in her stance. Her easy grace counterpoints the rooms, opulently textured with symbols of colonial and post-colonial knowledge woven into the fabric of European culture. The scenes are timeless, and could belong to the 19th century as much as 21st.

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Names, wrote the Native American botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer, *are the way we humans build relationships, not only with each other but with the living world*. The two-term Linnean system of nomenclature inherited its structure from the way the names were given in the West; and through the process of consistent naming, all things were made comparable so that they can be turned into useful resources. Nutmeg, cloves, pepper, mace: from barbarous and native to useful and civilised. Here, the power to name and rename has been subverted by the nameless figure, who chooses to remain unknowable. The reverence of the Dutch Golden Age for collecting, classifying and owning, reflected in the art of Nature Morte and the sentiment of memento mori, appears sapped of life in comparison with the living figure of the vengeful geospirit. She steps into the neoliberal avatar of conqueror's mind with glossily shielded contempt, not easily enumerable or quantifiable, her otherness luminous and disquieting.

It is interesting to remember the detachment of Dutch Protestant faith from belief systems of the enslaved nations even as they produced the most fervently religious works of art (*As the history grew more egregious, the still lifes seem to become more adamantly opulent* writes the art historian Julie Berger Hochstrasser); the violent denial of other faiths, equated with sorcery or savagery, is brought to relief by the bright plume of the veil-clad figure who brings into focus disequilibrium between the Orient and the Occident, the vitalism of Gaia and the supine backdrop of Europeaness.

Intersecting processes of invisibility and violence continue to loom in the work of Yelena Popova. She was born in the USSR in 1978, in Ozyorsk, a secret settlement dedicated to nuclear research. Since moving to the UK she has developed a body of work with conceptual stringency that contrasts its deceptive elegance and softness, in hues so close in value that they appear indistinguishable, separated by thin, crisp barriers. Focusing on matter and materiality with a nod to Russian Constructivism and Soviet Montage, her 'evaporating paintings', 'post-petrochemical paintings' or 'Sun-paths series' make a clear link with the economic systems of accelerated production, extraction, consumption and environmental degradation that has occurred after the WW2, especially after 1989. These delicate paintings, often in planet-like nimbuses and ovals, seem to evoke gradual disappearance of landscapes or borders, or vanishing figures from old analogue photographs removed by sunlight or a censor's hand. Undercurrents and censorship, ethereal toxicity, invisible gridlines of energy and movement seem to tarnish their skin-like linen, creating tactile compositions accompanied by smaller, satellite works.

From the perspective of violent spring of 2022, it is difficult to escape the question of the profit motive and the hidden cost of economic development in the West, embedded as it is in the current warfare between Russia and Ukraine and the standoff between East and West. The processes of terraforming have turned large parts of the Earth into neo-Europes; its inhabitants (neo-Europeans?) are struggling to maintain the moments of encounter that matter (like Rajkowska), that escape commodification (like Ates), or that may look for the intrinsic sense of planetary balance (Popova). In seismic shifts in climate as well as politics that feel as ancient as they are recent, fragile seems to encompass a way out of conquest, a possible source of regeneration and hope.

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