

**DARJA BAJAGIĆ**

NEW GALERIE

Selected Press

# Numéro

## POURQUOI EST-IL TEMPS DE S'INTÉRESSER AUX ARTISTES DES BALKANS ?

Par Thibaut Wychowanok

[...]

Certains artistes n'ont pas attendu. Darja Bajagic (née en 1990 au Monténégro) a suivi depuis longtemps un parcours international. Après des études à Portland et un diplôme obtenu à la Yale University School of Art, elle sera exposée au Luma Westbau à Zurich, au musée d'Art moderne de Varsovie et à New York où elle s'est installée. Bajagic s'est rapidement fait une renommée dans le milieu de l'art à coups d'œuvres qui mêlent efficacement sexe, meurtre et violence. On connaît sa passion pour l'imagerie pornographique du Net ou pour celle des serial killers, qui fait de ses pièces de bons résumés de notre époque obsessionnelle où les images les plus choquantes sont sans cesse l'objet de réappropriations. Lors de la dernière édition de la FIAC, la New Galerie, qui représente l'artiste, proposait ainsi un lot de haches recouvertes d'images trouvées au hasard de ses recherches sur le Net (tapez "axes and girls" sur Google...). À Belgrade, celle qui, selon la légende, s'est fait traiter de folle par l'historien de l'art Robert Storr – toujours un bon point pour un artiste – proposait une pièce inspirée du film WR: Mysteries of the Organism (1971) de Dusan Makavejev. Dans la satire du cinéaste yougoslave, une jeune prolétaire séduit un célèbre patineur sur glace évoquant Joseph Staline... jusqu'à ce qu'on retrouve la tête de la jeune femme décapitée par un patin. Dans son tableau, Darja Bajagic propose une version actualisée de la figure féminine en sang, issue cette fois-ci des images de la guerre des années 90 qu'elle se souvient d'avoir vues en ligne plus jeune. L'artiste construit ainsi habilement un pont entre les drames des années 70 et ceux plus récents.

[...]



WR: Mysteries of the Organism (1971) de Dusan Makavejev

# KALEIDOSCOPE

D A R J A

B A J A G I Ć

INTERVIEW  
PHOTOGRAPHY

BY  
BY

BEATRIX  
DANKO

RUF  
STEINER

**DARJA BAJAGIĆ**  
NEW GALERIE

# KALEIDOSCOPE

## DIGEST

Situated at the intersection of Minimalism and digital appropriation, the paintings of the Montenegrin-born, New York-based artist address subjects as controversial as sex and violence, challenging the viewer's perspective and complicating binary notions of morality.

BR In *Artforum's* "Best of 2016," Keren Cytter wrote with regard to your work that "such brave and loving representation of murder, sex, death, and abuse is rare in the cloud of careful referential choices in contemporary art." In her description, there is a striking contradiction, and an underlying question: What is your intention in confronting us with this very strong, explicit imagery you use? I understand that you collect it from the Internet and have been doing that for a very long time.

DB Yeah, it would depend on the series, but I often try to present both extremes of any story in some way. What I aim for is to create a space where the viewers can be confronted with this resulting ambiguity, its complex realities, to engage with things as they are and not as they appear to us. I never supply any "answers"—it's more about *showing*. I don't believe that art should ask anything of us, other than to see and then to re-see. The diptych that Karen wrote of, exhibited as a part of my solo show at Künstlerhaus Graz, was centered on two characters, Manuela Ruda and Sophie Lancaster. Manuela is a self-proclaimed Satanic murderess who together with her husband stabbed his mild-mannered workmate who loved The Beatles sixty-six times at the Dark Lord's bidding in Witten, Germany (the couple would later say that they'd chosen him as their sacrificial victim because he was "so funny and would be the perfect court jester for Satan"); by contrast, Sophie was a twenty-year-old Lancashire, England native who was fatally beaten in 2007 by five teenage boys, inexplicably enraged by her and her boyfriend's "goth" appearance. However, upon first glance, they're more similar than they are different—they're both of the goth subculture; the composition of the images is near identical. Your initial impression may be that they're not unlike each other, but in reality, they have totally different stories and endings.

BR The subject of murdered girls is a common thread in your work, and you have mentioned several times that it is okay for a woman to feel okay with these images. In the wake of the political turmoil we are facing in the Trump era, suddenly you see a lot of activism coming up, including women's activism. From this perspective, it would be great to hear your bit about activism in general and feminism.

DB This came up a lot when I was in graduate school: the question of female representation in my practice, where I stand on things. To

be honest, that is not my interest, nor my starting position. There are other themes that I am more inspired by than the question of female representation and feminism; or more importantly, I find it to be indivisible from the question of my moral obligation, and it's not my place to moralize.

BR So where does your work start from?

DB In a sense, it's always broadly centered around the status of the image, and, more recently, focused on the duality of good versus evil, and our perspectives of it, how wavering it is or can be, and unsteady—and fortunately so, as it complicates binary readings of morality. For example, over the past year, I've been collaborating with Joseph (Joe) Druce, a former child abuse victim and anti-pedophilia campaigner who murdered John J. Geoghan, a convicted pedophile priest, in a vigilante attack while serving a prison sentence for another killing. I was struck by Joe and his artwork after seeing a drawing in which he depicted Geoghan with the text "stole the innocence of 147 children: 8–10 years" alongside a self-portrait with the text "stole the life of one pedophile: life w/o parole," with a headline reading "JUSTICE!?! no/yes no/yes no/yes." One of the first projects resulting from the collaboration was a series of paintings focusing on both victims and perpetrators of murders of a pedophilic intent, incorporating Joe's slogans—such as "Save A Child, Kill A Pedophile," or "God Bless Innocence"—as text banners. These paintings also featured images of Dominno—a now-retired pornographic actress famous for her busty, curvaceous figure—in provocative near-nude as well as nude poses, always directly looking into the eye of the camera, confronting the spectator(s) with a shameless, expressionless face. There's obviously this added tension of having her present, her highly sexualized body amongst the ephemeral photographic remnants of victimized children. Her purpose here is of a caryatid of sorts, but more importantly, what her story adds is that regardless of having a stereotypically "womanly" figure, she was consistently dressed in too-small children's clothing (with hand-drawn marker drawings of butterflies on her shoes, or cartoon characters such as Snoopy on her spaghetti-strapped tank top) and posed in a manner that alluded to her being babyish.

BR What are your plans for your upcoming exhibition at KALEIDOSCOPE's exhibition space

# KALEIDOSCOPE

NEW RADICALS



*Brittane Drexel ft. Pierrot (Stuck-Out Tongue)* (2017) is part of a new series of UV-printed, acrylic-painted, aluminum-framed canvases presented by Bajagić in her upcoming solo exhibition "Damnatio Memoriae" at KALEIDOSCOPE's new space in Milan, from 11 October–25 November 2017.

in Milan? How do you want to make people feel uncomfortable in a constructive way?

DB [*Laughs*] The series is focused on Brittane Drexel, a teenage girl who was abducted and repeatedly gang-raped in a "stash house." She was murdered after her disappearance had generated "too much media attention." There will be four paintings, each using an image of Brittane and her friends disseminated on various news media sources upon her disappearance. In an effort to retain her family and friends' privacy, all faces except Brittane's where concealed with black censor bars. Sometimes, to cover a large group of friends, the bars were multiplied to create awkward black shapes. So, they're very strange, sad, and eerie images, of Brittane smiling and looking to be having fun, essentially alone. Each image was then painted over and printed with various faces of Pierrot—the naïve, ever-trusting, tragic clown—disrupting and burying whatever's left of Brittane's alienated face. They're more quietly ominous than they are "in your face," I'd say. There is also the framing element, which is important—these gated door frames that will cover various lengths of the canvases, existing as additional partial-barriers, or entryways, depending on how you see [it].

BR Your earlier, flap paintings referred very clearly to minimalism. Can you talk about the con-

flicting relationship between formalism and content, and how you're using it in your work?

DB I do think I am a minimalist at heart, you know? For the early paintings, a lot of the "layouts" were borrowed from the structure of magazines, flipping through pages, as well as Web pages, scrolling, clicking. And, as a teenager and through graduate school, I had a serious obsession with Ad Reinhardt's "black paintings," together with his dry sense of humor—the cartoons and the texts.

BR You mentioned the word "borrowing," and of course the term "appropriation" has also been used several times in relationship to how you use images and text drawn from the Internet. I'm wondering, how do you decide what to borrow? And are you happy with the word "appropriation" when it comes to the practice of a younger generation of artists, and their changed behaviors in relationship to the accessibility of images and information as the Internet provides it?

DB I prefer "borrowing," because it's more accurate to me. I feel as though I am "temporarily" using materials to tell or retell stories in my own way, always retaining and referring to the original context, as it's crucial to my practice. When I was at Yale, I went to a Thomas Hirschhorn talk, as he's someone I really look up to and admire. It resulted in one of the most awkward and uncomfortable Q&As. A

# KALEIDOSCOPE

THERE'S A SUBVERSIVE POWER IN PORNOGRAPHY—SIMULTANEOUS DESIRE, FEAR. I'D ARGUE THE SAME FOR VIOLENT IMAGES.



Installation view of *She's more obsessed than Dahmer, she's more calculated than Bundy, and certainly more faceless than Batman and The Girl Who Wouldn't Die*, starring Brittane Drexel, both 2017, as part of the exhibition "89Plus: Americans 2017" at LUMA Westbau, Zurich.

student stood up to ask him where his images came from—did he know, did he care? It was clear that she had already made up her mind, that he didn't have a responsibility to his materials, and that that was revolting to her. His reaction was to laugh at us and shame us for being privileged Ivy League students, and then to angrily condemn us for believing that knowing anything about the images, including where they came from, somehow makes them more acceptable.

BR Well it's interesting how you pair Thomas Hirschhorn and Ad Reinhardt as your influences. That's sort of reflected in your work—there is a merging of overabundance and minimalism, you know?

DB Yeah, there is. You know, I think that I have pretty tacky tastes, too. Since moving to the

States, my dad became a truck driver. He looks like a Hells Angel—he looks insane, in the best way. All of those patches I used in my early paintings were ones he'd gifted me before I even began integrating them into artworks. "Thanks for looking," for example. It's tongue-in-cheek in the context of a painting. So, there's definitely this Americana tackiness thing present in my work on various levels.

BR Going back to the notion of radicality, which provides the frame for this interview, do you see a subversive potential in working with these materials? When you choose to borrow these particular materials, do you think about the impact of art on societal conditions? You once said that pornography for you is a signifier for subversion and transgression, and of course there is a lot of potential there

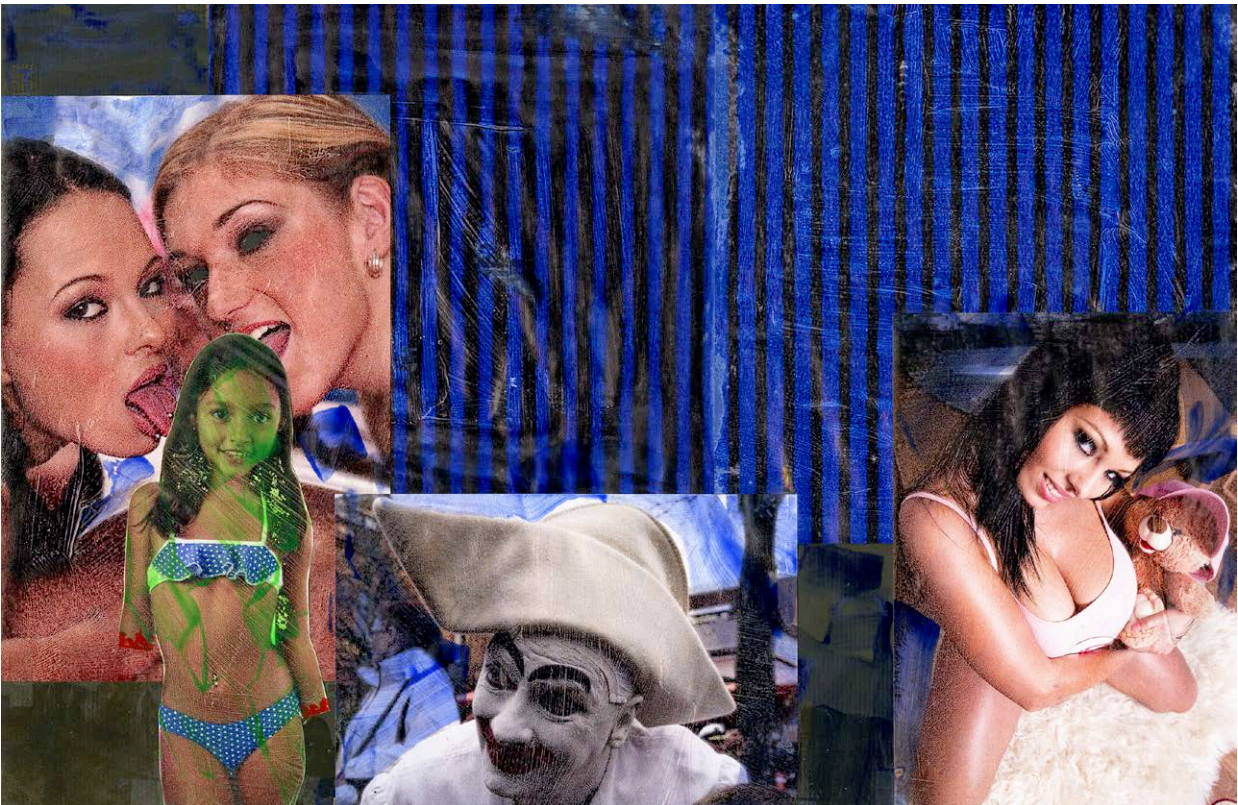
# KALEIDOSCOPE

in terms of... emancipation is definitely the wrong word, but maybe of resistance.

DB Yeah, I wouldn't say pornography is my focus, but it's definitely present. One thing that interests me about pornography is its potential to possess as well as estrange. There's a subversive power in that—simultaneous desire, fear. I'd argue the same for "violent" images.

filling Chloë's role. She shows nothing but the showing itself. Like Chloë—who can be seen looking brazenly into the camera whilst getting double-penetrated and petting a cat—Dominno doesn't simulate any pleasure, nor does she affect any complicity with the viewers. But it's this nullification that "opens" her—she's emancipated her-

NEW RADICALS



*Dominno's Playground*, 2017, acrylic paint, ink, inkjet prints and tape on paper. This and similar collages taken out from the artist's private sketchbooks, dating from 2014 to today, have been collected by KALEIDOSCOPE in a new artist book released on the occasion of the Milan show.

BR Well, you refer to a very philosophical approach, even someone like Agamben, in defining pornography as a place of subversion.

DB Yes, Agamben wrote about that '90s French pornographic actress, Chloë des Lysses (who also happens to be a photographer)—her absolutely inexpressive and indifferent display, and how it rendered the whole apparatus of the pornographic image inoperative, inviting new, freer uses for the eroticism otherwise captured. *Profanations* deeply affected me. I'd say that Dominno's appearance in the Joe collaboration is ful-

self from a relation to an end.

BR Both characters seem to talk about a detachment from individuality, or replacement of individuality.

DB Yes, it's true. It's something I think about in relationship to the images of the victims and perpetrators I use, and their "facelessness" in news media. There is always an insatiable hunger for more. In the end, they're [treated as] neither generic nor individual. We've been reduced to images. It is only in unraveling the image that we can free it and ourselves. **K**

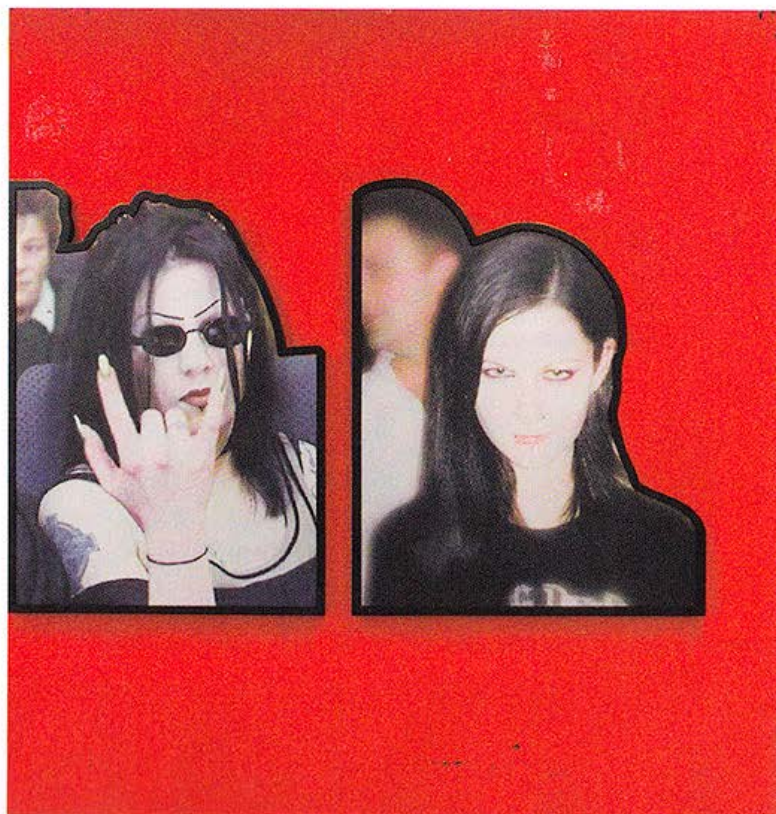
Darja Bajagić (b. 1990, Montenegro) lives and works in New York. Beatrix Ruf is Director of the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam. Images courtesy of the artist; Carlos/Ishikawa, London; and New Galerie, Paris.

# ARTFORUM

ARTISTS' ARTISTS BEST OF 2016

## KEREN CYTTER

"Darja Bajagić: Unlimited Hate" (Künstlerhaus Halle für Kunst & Medien, Graz, Austria) Darja Bajagić's sculptures in "Unlimited Hate" consisted of found images of women printed on light boxes, with thin streams of blood running from top to bottom, operated by hidden pumps. *Manuela Ruda & Sophie Lancaster*, 2016, for example, a diptych displaying found photographs of Ruda and Lancaster in kitschy frames curved around their figures, mixes hardcore gore with adolescent romanticism that shifts from porn to poetry. Ruda was a satanic murderess who together with her husband stabbed his workmate sixty-six times. Lancaster was attacked and murdered by five teenage boys because she was dressed as a goth. Bajagić's campy approach borders on religious iconography in her unlimited fascination with magic, fiction, and goth. Such brave and loving representation of murder, sex, death, and abuse is rare in the cloud of careful referential choices in contemporary art.



Darja Bajagić, *Manuela Ruda & Sophie Lancaster (detail)*, 2016, UV-printed, brushed-aluminum Dibond, MDF frame, acrylic paint, canvas, overall 120 x 120". Photo: Markus Krottendorfer.





## DARJA BAJAGIĆ by Franklin Melendez

**F**ollow the links long enough and things are bound to get weird. Darja Bajagić knows this well – in fact, that might be how she stumbled onto the website, ‘maniacnanny.com,’ though at this point who can really say? You can visit it if you like. Click and be greeted by a nicely legible header in a cheerful shade of pink – it boasts “The Best Serial Killers, The Best Gore, The Best Crime Scene Photos.” True to the billing the site scrolls down to reveal a hearty assortment of real-life carnage – crime photos (contemporary and historical), police mug shots, murder scene documentation, victim forensics and so forth. Each image is carefully indexed with an extensive catalog of tags (‘spree killing’, ‘racist’, ‘perverted sex practices’, and so on and so forth). Interspersed among some of the entries are long blocks of texts all in caps – detailed accounts of gruesome acts that unexpectedly morph into descriptions of foods being craved by the editor at that particular moment in time.

Depending on your temperament, Maniac Nanny’s tasty idiosyncrasies will likely elicit a queasy mixture of fascination and revulsion, together with an indescribable something else. Therein lies the rub for Bajagić, whose practice has always been attuned to those impulses that lurk at the fringes. Niche porn, fetish sites, murderabilia outlets and its neighboring nether regions have provided prime fodder for a widely varied output that to date encompasses zines, collages, videos, sculptures

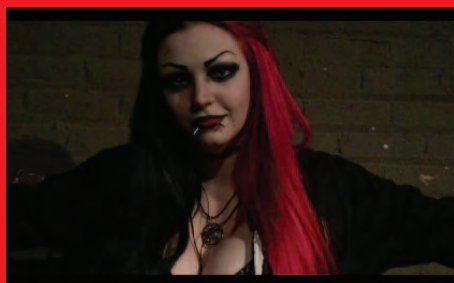
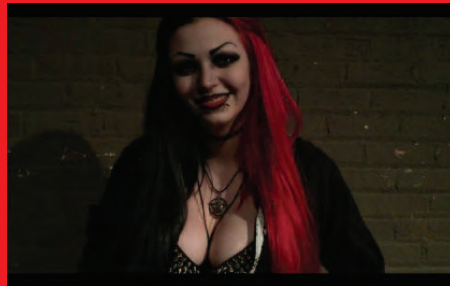
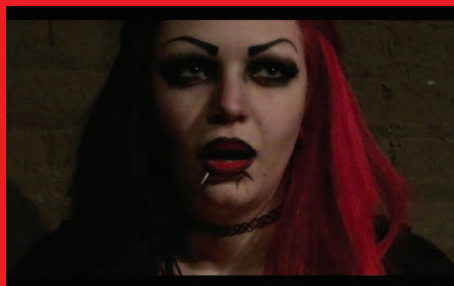
and assemblages of painted and printed canvas that stand in for paintings.

In all of these, the specter of violence hovers diffusely yet is omnipresent. At times, it can be coyly suggestive as in the mall Goth motifs that punctuate many of the compositions (*Untitled Collage (goths have more fun ...)*, 2015). At others, it hones in on more specialized fare, such as a group of hatchets printed with images lifted from a women-with-weapons fetish site – the resulting customized mementos implicating the viewer in all the fun (*Ex Axes - Sword*, 2015). Even darker still, there are the stage blood splatters on *Untitled Collage (Blutengel ft. Cathy Torrez)*, 2015, whose cryptic title, when subjected to a simple Google search, yields up its tragic real-life tale; then, there’s the crudely rendered pin-up drawing preserved in a plastic sleeve embedded in a framed collage (*Dacha: Robert Bardo 8x11 ink drawing of porn star ‘Gauge’*, 2014). Follow the clues and you’ll discover its origins in a controversial e-commerce site specializing in art keepsakes from killers on death row.

Neither sensationalist nor banal (or perhaps a little both?), these images have been described by Bajagić as ‘blanks.’ This is clearly not some claim to neutrality, for each is voluptuously laden with its own content and history. Perhaps she is simply acknowledging her own predilections: a willingness to leave things undigested, vulnerable and open to their own missed connections and random encounters.



Amazing girls. With wonderful personalities. There saints. Talk to them about life. Love. Politics. (still). 2015. Video 10' 24" opposite page: Please Find My Amy. 2015. acrylic-latex, canvas, UV prints 152,4 x 114,3 cm previous pages: Studio and studio office snapshots, 2015 (p. 169) All Images Courtesy: the artist and New Galerie, Paris



It's a dangerous game to be sure – stripped of parameters, reliant on contingency and staunchly resistant to the usual art historical points of orientation. Bataille, Oleg Kulik, Carol Clover, Laibach, Thomas Hirschhorn (to name just a few) are all equivalents in a field littered with fan art, clippings from gore-enthusiast mags, *Hellraiser* memorabilia... I could go on. Far from a fixed endpoint, each fragment hovers before you as a volatile link, a seductive lure into the murky terrain where hidden fantasies and unspoken desires bleed into things still inchoate and unnamed. Seasoned surfers of porn will be familiar with that sensation: a curious click inadvertently eliciting endless pop-ups – windows upon windows, beckoning onto pleasures untold. There's a thrill, followed by instinctual fear – perhaps for uncovering personal cravings once thought unimaginable.

For this reason, Bajagić might be less interested in the accountability of images than the driving need to make them so. It is a philosophical questioning undertaken as intimate work, poetic and awkward for all its

proximity. The recent video, *Amazing girls. With wonderful personalities. There saints. Talk to them about life. Love. Politics.*, 2015, speaks to this with a series of short interviews conducted at the now-defunct Chicago goth club, Neo. Each snippet is structured by four brief questions: 'what did you eat today?', 'What is a happy story?', 'What is a sad/scary story?', 'Parting words?'

The answers range from the mundane (cereal for dinner, a fortune cookie, orange chicken a bit dry) to the humorous (my rescue cat got fat) to the poignant (long distance partings, self inflicted wounds, a parent's death). It is an odd mix that never congeals into a single confessional, but rather lingers as morsels of information left unresolved. In that sense, this is never satisfying – perhaps in the same way that cereal for dinner can never be satisfying, even if it's sustenance for the world we inhabit. There's a small kind of pleasure to be derived from that knowledge, but one – as Bajagić aptly notes – you might be a little ashamed to admit to yourself.

# Flash Art

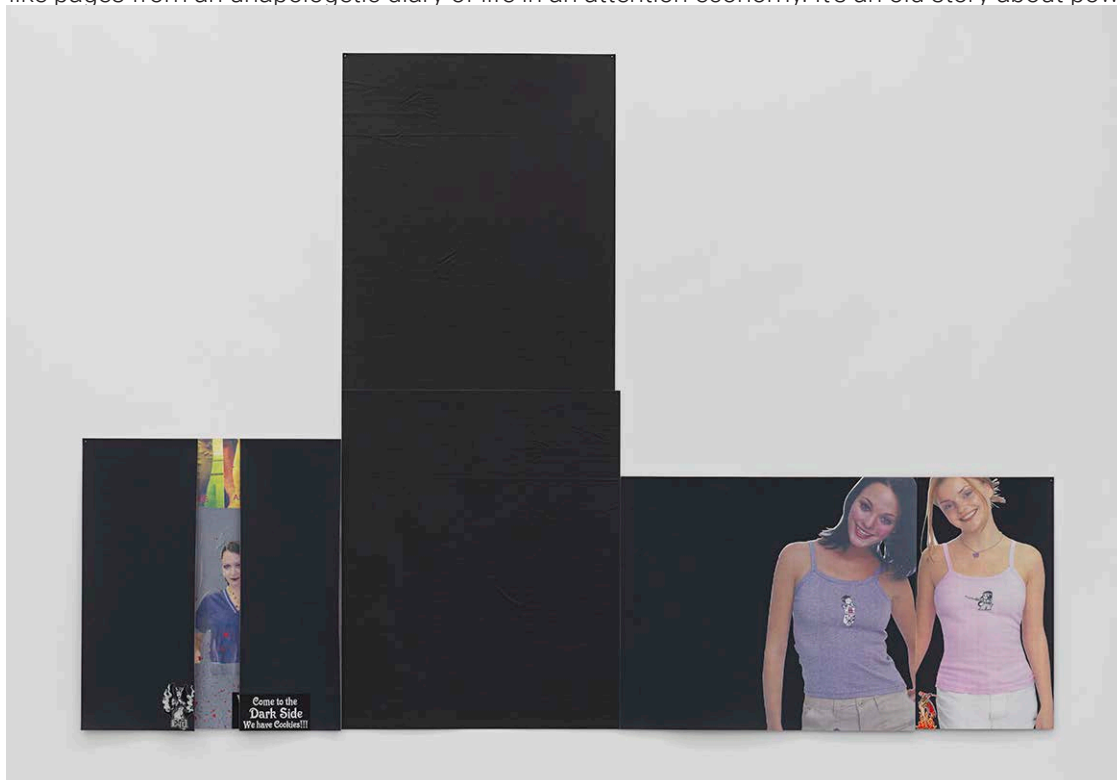
## DARJA BAJAGIĆ, BED STUY LOVE AFFAIR / NEW YORK

By Sam Korman

Amy Fitzpatrick has been missing since New Year's Day 2008. Over the last several years, her story has grown more lurid: she may have been involved with an Irish hit man, an investigating lawyer's dossiers were stolen, her brother was stabbed to death in an incident that involved their mother's boyfriend, and her mother recently published a book on the entire experience.

With eyes wide open and lips pursed — the profile-picture-pose duckface — Fitzpatrick appears on the flyer for Darja Bajagić's solo exhibition with Bed Stuy Love Affair. The missing person wears a trashy branded tank top, the inspiration for the show's title: "Diesel."

Exhibitions at Bed Stuy Love Affair often feel intertwined with their context, but Bajagić's inhabits the matte-black RV's cheap rolled-out linoleum floors and walls seamlessly — it belongs to the tidy creepiness of floral-print sheets neatly tucked in with 3mm poly overlaid on the bed. Rows of regularly sized half-page collages line the bedroom gallery, culled together from Bajagić's archive of grainy murderabilia, gore, Blog del Narco stories, Instagram selfies, memorial photographs, porn, missing-persons reports, erotic cartoons, etc. One demi-melodrama seems to depict a teen-girl hangout, careful to never reveal an actual killer. TV crime shows typically redeem their content through narratives that restore a sense of elemental justice, but Bajagić's wavy papers appear like pages from an unapologetic diary of life in an attention economy. It's an old story about power; an image's



moral ambiguity is as liquid as cash.

Does Bajagić accrue some debt of responsibility by using these images? In noir films, women tend to be strong and willful if somewhat damned by the power struggles of men. With the video *Amazing girls*. With wonderful personalities. There saints. Talk to them about life. Love. Politics...., 2015, Bajagić unrepentantly takes us through and beyond this authorial dichotomy. She asks several women to recount the same personal details outside of a goth bar. One woman describes her sushi dinner before awkwardly recounting the tragic story of her father's death. Her parting words? No regrets.

It is perhaps this nostalgia, built into the web's ethos, that compels us to share, no matter how dumb and meaningless it can make us seem. Power saw the same potential. However, in shades of humor both dark and absurd, Bajagić keeps these ubiquitous and traumatic images from resolving into the fully irreconcilable darkness built into human affairs.

**DARJA BAJAGIĆ**  
NEW GALERIE

# BLOUINARTINFO

## CONTRARY TO WHAT YOU MAY HAVE HEARD, DARJA BAJAGIĆ IS NOT CRAZY

By Scott Indirisek

It turns out that it's not always easy to transform overnight from an ultra-minimalist painter into something entirely different — say, a Conceptual artist with a penchant for mixing layered, monochromatic swaths of canvas with laser-cut icons and found imagery pulled from fetish sites catering to aficionados of naked-girls-wielding-baseball-bats. For Darja Bajagic, recently graduated from Yale's M.F.A. painting program and opening her debut solo show in New York with Room East this Sunday, it was somewhat of a rocky road. The 24 year old had entered the acclaimed program with a portfolio of beyond-subtle works — the barest ripples of white-on-white, for instance, or canvases lightly inscribed with geometric graphite marks mirroring the outlines of a tennis court. At the same time she'd also been avidly making zines, many of them compiling found pornographic stills and other images, which she distributed to friends and online. That more incendiary portion of her oeuvre wasn't part of her application; when Bajagic finally decided to combine her two interests, she found that Yale's faculty wasn't all that appreciative.

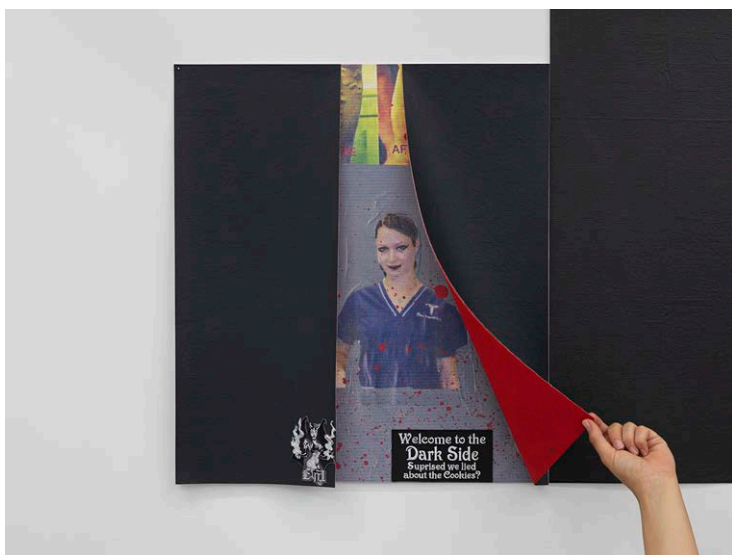
"I met with Robert Storr, the head of the department, and he literally told me I was crazy," the artist recalled. "And that Yale would pay for all of my counseling and therapy during a leave of absence to seek help for my obsessive-compulsive behavioral habits of collecting images of girls and porn... that I should look deep inside of myself to figure out what are the problems I have with myself, as a woman, for being O.K. with these kinds of images even existing in the world, let alone propelling them in paintings and in the gallery system." Bajagic countered that she was already achieving some degree of recognition for the work, outside of the academic program: "Of course," she remembered him saying. "Sex sells."

Far from dissuading her, the resistance Bajagic experienced at Yale confirmed her own interest in the kind of loaded imagery that she'd been collecting and appropriating. She was also reluctant to cave in to an easy reading. "They wanted me to take a position of being anti-porn, but I wasn't," she said. "A lot of the conversation was about my stance, and how I could use porn, as a woman — my responsibilities to all women, everywhere. They [asked], 'What's at stake? What are you doing other than re-presenting things as they are?' Even if I was just re-presenting things as they are, which is true to some extent, why is that so problematic? These images are more complex than people give them credit for."

Many of those images are taken from Eastern European porn and niche fetish sites. (Bajagic, who was born in Montenegro and raised in Egypt, came to the States with her family when she was around 9 — but she says it's more the unique aesthetic of the erotic work that appeals to her, rather than any focus on which country it came from.) She often rephotographs or scans the originals, printing them on pieces of canvas that are then incorporated into larger compositions, augmented with flaps, eBay-purchased patches depicting "She-Devil" women, laser-cut numbers, and clip art culled from Photoshop. They're a strange hybrid: Bajagic's earlier, coolly aloof Minimalism married to the visual language of the Internet and its more esoteric and perverse nooks.

One painting includes both a scanned-and-defaced postcard image of a young Natalie Portman with a photo taken from a rubber-fetish magazine. Another compiles several images taken from a website for those titillated by lesbians wearing denim jeans; Bajagic selected a series of shots in which the models are giving the middle finger to the photographer. (She has a thing for the oddities of the genre — the "pre-explicit narrative shot of just the girl looking into the camera smiling or making a funny face.") The works, she said, have several facets — the layered flaps, the odd, unexplained inclusion of what could be page numbers — that tie them to her earlier zine experiments. Her Room East show will also include two patches re-envisioned as large sculptures printed on metal; one, of an angel-woman sitting back-to-back with her devilish counterpart, will hang in the gallery's front window on Orchard Street.

The exhibition will also feature new work that will do little to convince Robert Storr of Bajagic's mental health: Prints that appropriate imagery from letters and drawings made by serial killers on death row, and include the actual ephemera (purchased from sites like Redrum Autographs) encased in a folder and framed with the print itself. "The idea of not having access to the full thing is always interesting to me," Bajagic said — perhaps an apt way to approach her curiously compelling output thus far, which is equally tantalizing and maddening, sensual and austere, legible and yet ultimately elusive.



# KALEIDOSCOPE

## FUTURA 89+

### Hans Ulrich Obrist and Simon Castets interview young artist DARJA BAJAGIĆ

THE  
FUTURA  
89+ SERIES  
FEATURES  
INTERVIEWS  
WITH ARTISTS, WRITERS,  
ACTIVISTS, ARCHITECTS,  
FILMMAKERS, SCIENTISTS AND  
ENTREPRENEURS WHO WERE  
BORN IN OR AFTER 1989.



In a recent tweet you said, “There are people who believe that things that shouldn’t be there mustn’t be shown.” Do you believe that pornography shouldn’t be there? And if it is there, that it must be shown?

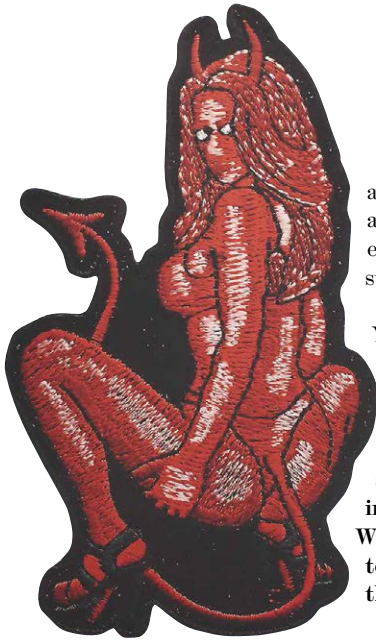
A conservative estimate would be that 80% of my tweets are sourced from elsewhere; that one was taken from a *New York Times* article, “Messy Humanity, Warts, Dreams and All,” on Ulrich Seidl’s *Paradise* trilogy. At fuller length, it reads: “Speaking of a scene in *Dog Days* in which two men torment a woman, Mr. Seidl, 60, said by phone from Vienna, “There are people who believe that things that shouldn’t be there mustn’t be shown.” I believe pornography has



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# KALEIDOSCOPE

## FUTURA 89+



a place in this world, as does everything else. I appreciate its subversiveness.

**You started collecting, and working with, these kinds of images as a teenager, eventually using them for zines. What compelled you to start collecting them?**

One of my earliest memories—at six years of age—is of taking photographs of a television screen at my uncle Boris's house, on which my cousin

The image search and collection process is like hunting.

Raško and I were watching a pornographic film. Later, as a pre-teenager, I was collecting images—both pornographic and not—of girls on the Internet to use as aliases on various social networking websites. I would habitually browse, looking at images of girls—first out of boredom, then curiosity—in my father's Playboys, and via WebTV cha-

Previous page: *A00*, 2014

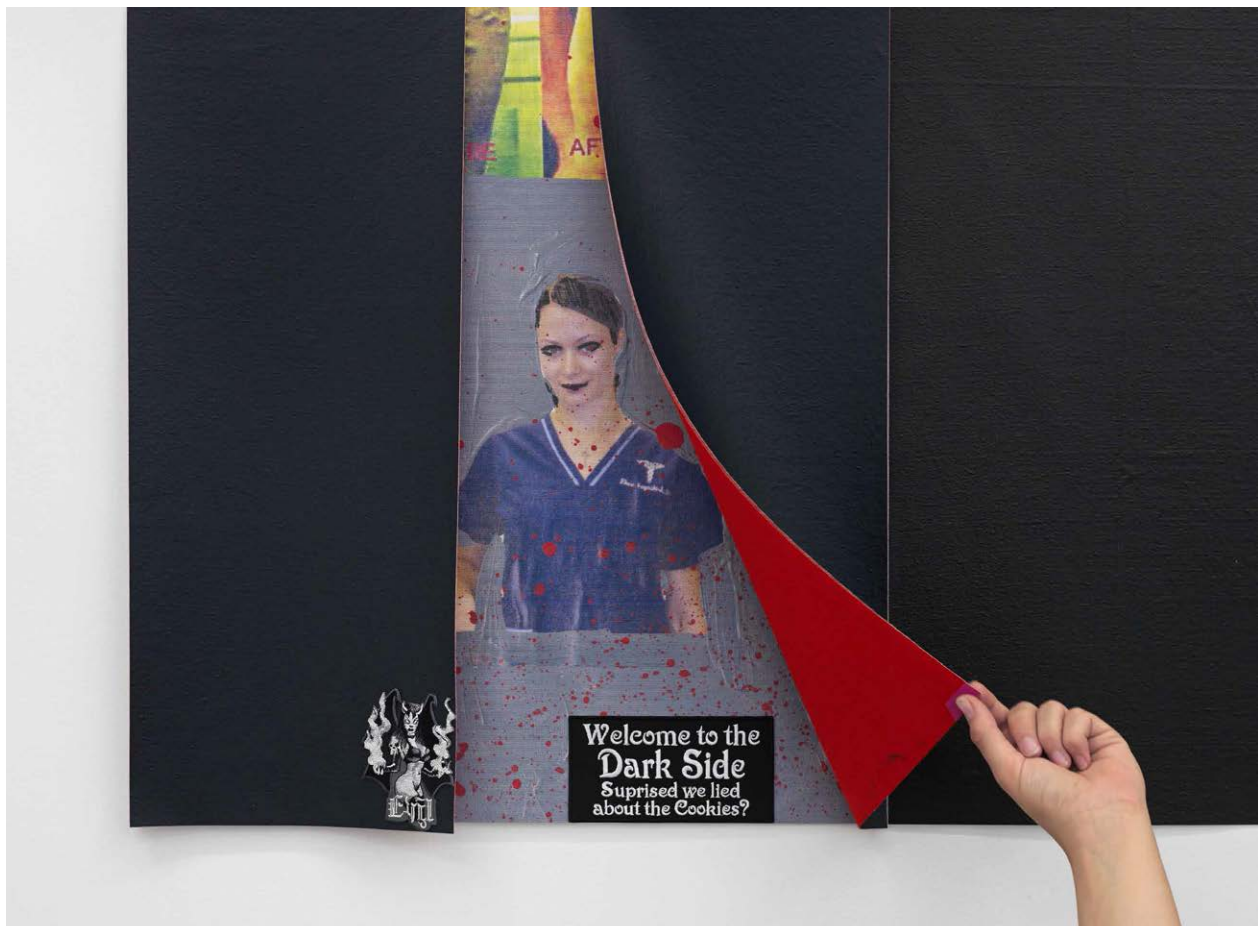
Left: *Devil Girl Stamp*, 2014

Below: *Come to the Dark Side We Have Cookies!!!*, 2014

Right: *Kill Bill: After*, 2014

trooms and forums. This was not an art project—I was just socially awkward. Those images were my friends.

The beginning of including these kinds of images into an art practice, it took the form of cut-up, deconstructed collages: juxtaposing a bruised thigh with a pattern from a blanket. I then started recreating the “collages”



# KALEIDOSCOPE

## REGULARS

I was collecting online—"collages" as in everything, ranging from book covers to website layouts, disparaging celebrity photographs with text overlays from forums—to be juxtaposed with those original "collages" from the printed zines. I would liken the search and collection to hunting.

**Your earlier works were very minimalist paintings. Many of your current works still carry through that minimalist, monochrome aesthetic, but overall, your work has changed quite drastically. What prompted this change? How did the transition unfold?**

I do not see them as so different, ultimately—rather, only at a surface level. The black paintings were commenced at Yale, during my very last month in the graduate program. They stemmed from my desire to combine images from my collection with new forms; I'd done the same thing earlier with videos.

In the gray paintings, the images had been scattered about, often nearly concealed. The images in the black paintings are more available—partially obscured at times by flaps, but still, more available.

During the process, I thought a lot about Ad Reinhardt—his "ultimate" paintings, his satirical cartoons—and Thomas Hirschhorn—his collages, and his texts about his collages. I like that they are always suspicious, are not taken seriously, resist information and facts, are unprofessional, create a truth of their own....

**You have said that you want to present the images as "blank images," by "forcing the viewer to come to terms with all of that baggage and then ignoring it simultaneously" in order to see the images on a formal level. When you ignore that baggage, what do you see in the images?**

I don't think a surface reading of any one thing is an efficient one. By ignoring the primary reading—the first impact, the "baggage"—one becomes more open to exploring other perspectives and comes to terms with assumptions and beliefs. This is an act of neutralization, or desexualization: it occurs not only in the works' imagery employed, but in the viewer as well.

Seeing the images on a formal level is one way of beginning to set aside, the "baggage" to and see the images from a different perspective. For example, you might consider a prop you'd missed: 1) "a girl is sitting on a bed, simultaneously rubbing herself and reading a book" versus 2) "a girl is sitting on

a bed, simultaneously rubbing herself and reading *The Fermata* by Nicholson Baker" (see *Sample XXX Puzzle- Pin-up Land™ Cum-centration*, 2013, at 6:20). It's emancipatory.

**There are several recurring motifs, in your work: chess boards, puzzle pieces and crosswords. What is the significance of these images for you?**

Chess signifies a back-and-forth between things. The board's pattern has associations of duality, polarity—ideas still relevant to me. Puzzle pieces signify parts of a greater, unknown "whole." Crosswords signify that there are spaces to fill—they are left empty: you have to figure it out yourself.

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# KALEIDOSCOPE

## REGULARS

**Your recent work also appropriates material such as serial killers' letters and drawings. How do you see this content relating to the other content? Are this and pornography both representations of "evil"?**

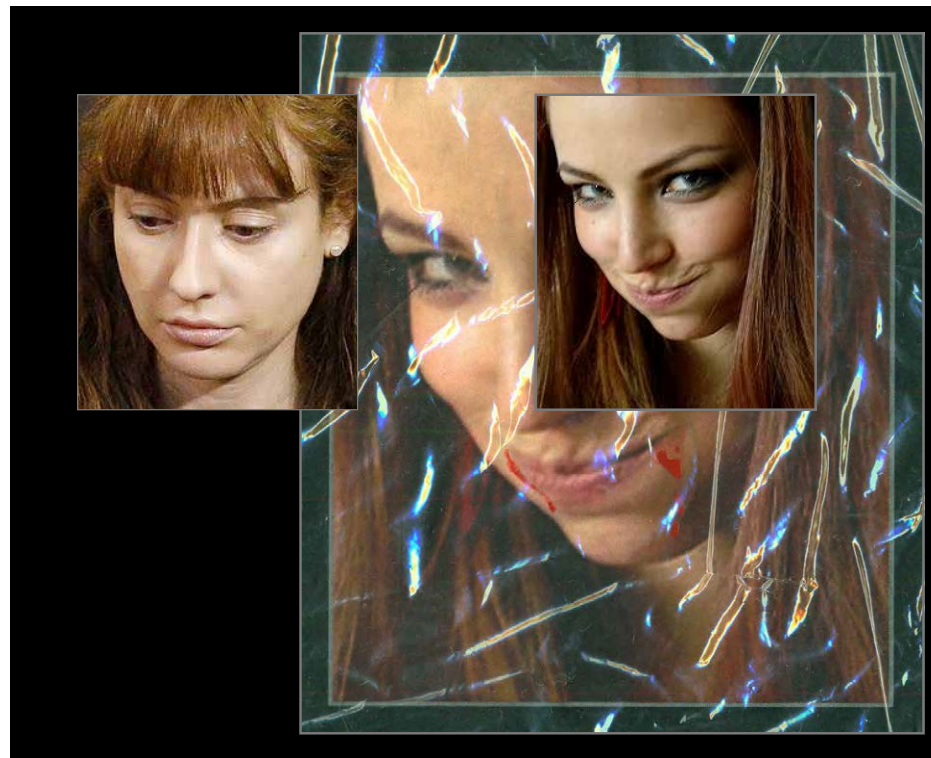
No, they are not representations of "evil" because—to quote Alain Badiou—"Evil does not exist except as a judgment made."

I collect serial killers' ephemera that depict she-devils, pornographic actresses, and other representations of women. It relates to the pornographic images—they both raise questions about conceptions of "good" and "evil" and are forms of collective self-expression—pure, profane, free.

**You've said you "don't think that women need to be saved." Can you explain what you mean by this?**

This was in response to a question about my "refusal to be an activist about my subject." I do not want to rehabilitate anyone, or not to rehabilitate anyone. That is not my job.

**You avoid being photographed and in the past have reported any tagged photos of you on Facebook. What is it about**



**your own image being captured and shared that you don't like?**

I prefer the focus to be placed on the artworks, including the girls in the artworks—their faces, their gazes. Somehow, they seem more representative of me. There is more of me to see in them than in me.

**What kind of social media do you use / not use and why?**

I use Instagram, Tumblr and Twitter. I use Instagram to share my own images; Tumblr for news and updates; Twitter

Above: *Lost Girls (Ft. Ice Cream Killer)*, 2014  
for words. I do not use Facebook—it feels too personal and invasive.

All images courtesy of the artist.

**Would you follow yourself on Instagram?**

I mostly post pictures of awkward, amusing texts ("Call Me! / I'll Whip Your Ass Purple!"), or semi-gore images from B-horror movie reviews, or cute animals. I am into all this stuff, so yes, I would follow myself!

**We are interested in compiling a book of interviews based on banal security questions asked when one sets up an online account. In what year was your father born?**

1954.

**What is your mother's maiden name?**

Radović.

I appreciate the subversiveness of pornography.



# KALEIDOSCOPE

## REGULARS

**What was the name of your elementary school?**

Pakistan International School, and Donley Elementary School.

**What is your oldest sibling's birthday month and year?**

I have one sibling, and his name is Filip; his birthday month is November and year is 1978.

**What is your favorite color?**

Gray.

**For the 89plus Marathon in 2013, you participated digitally through your work *The A Project*, in which you checked out a book from your university's library and marked out every appearance of the letter A, keeping a tal-**

**ly along the way. Where does a project like this sit in your oeuvre?**

The book was *Elogio della menzogna* (ed.: Salvatore S. Nigro)—Italian, of 154 marked pages. Online, its “subjects” are listed as “Truthfulness and Falsehood” and “Deception— Early works to 1800.” The cover of the book features the painting *Portrait of a Woman of the Hofer Family*, dated about 1470 and belong-

ing to the collection of the National Gallery, London; the artist remains unknown, as does the sitter. The de-

I don't think a surface reading of any one thing is an efficient one.

Darja Bajagić (Montenegrin, b. 1990) is an artist who lives and works in New York. She is represented by Room East, New York.

scription of the painting on the National Gallery's website reads, “On her headdress is a fly, either a symbol of mortality or a reminder of the artist's skills of illusion.”

I was drawn to this indecipherability, the sense of mystery. The project began as a passive, then active nihilistic endeavor—and a questioning of meaningfulness. I dwelled on this idea: “Thinking is an arbitrary fiction, the false sign of an equally false inner experience.” ☹

# MOUSSE

Mousse Magazine

# MOUSSE



**In this Issue:** Lawrence Abu Hamdan, Art and Literature, Darja Bajagić, Walter Dahn, Fiction in Reality, Have We Become the Internet?, Lynn Hershman Leeson, The History of Exhibitions, Intimacy in Art, Nicholas Mangan, Park McArthur, The Multiplication of Moving Perspectives, Opening up to

N° 47

the Unexpected, Philippe Parreno and Paul B. Preciado, Systems Prosthetics, Time as Material, The Withdrawal of the Artist, Betty Woodman, Steina and Woody Vasulka.



February - March 2015

**Mousse Magazine**  
Contemporary Art Magazine issue #47  
February – March 2015

The Artist as Curator #6  
(International edition only)



# MOUSSE

## LIVING YOUR UNLIVED LIFE

The work of Darja Bajagić recontextualizes saucy images seen as stereotypes by Western eyes—the clever Slavic fox, the Russian web-matched wife—granting them a sort of liberating ambiguity. In this conversation with Natalia Sielewicz she talks about her work, Agamben and porn.

As she recalls in a recent interview, artist **Darja Bajagić** – who recently graduated from Yale’s MFA painting program – once had a meeting with Robert Storr, Dean of the Yale School of Art: “he literally told me I was crazy and that Yale would pay for all of my counseling and therapy during a leave of absence to seek help for my obsessive-compulsive behavioral habits of collecting images of girls and porn.” Bajagić’s practice is indeed concerned with the ways in which female sexuality is depicted and its various means of web-based distribution. By incorporating pornographic imagery her works address current issues such as power struggles between the sexes, censorship, authorship, and the digital landscape. Bajagić was born in Montenegro and emigrated to the US; she is fascinated with notions of concealment and misdirection, and with the forms in which taboo content is privatized and made accessible on the internet.

## Darja Bajagić

**NATALIA SIELEWICZ** Before and after the fall of the Berlin Wall subversive affirmation and over-identification were at the forefront of neo-avant-garde practices in Eastern Europe, among artists who sought resistance through apparent appropriation of prevailing ideologies. I am thinking in particular about the Slovenian group Laibach and Moscow Conceptualism employing the totalitarian aesthetic, or Oleg Kulik performing the stereotypes of the Eastern European Other in *I Bite America and America Bites Me*. In your work you appropriate sexual imagery found online and meticulously arrange it in formal compositions. In the past you also constructed various identities and started relationships with men on social media using the likenesses of sexy Eastern European women. Do you believe that porn can be a vehicle for subversion and transgression?

### DARJA BAJAGIĆ

I love Laibach—one of my favorite t-shirts (and images) is theirs, and it reads: “Freedom of Speech Go to Hell!” And, yes, in the past, as a pre-teenager, I was collecting images—both pornographic and not—of girls on the Internet to use as aliases on various social networking websites. This was not an art project—I was just socially awkward. I do believe that pornography can be and is a vehicle for subversion and transgression. Its power rests in its contemporary, neutralized state or in its potential to be so: inoperative, deactivated in its “old” or “original” use, and unrestricted to “new” or “translated” uses.

The surface reading of a pornographic image (or anything, really) is not efficient. There is more to see (or never to see) than one sees, usually. Consider this: 1) “a girl is sitting on a bed, simultaneously rubbing herself, and reading a book,” versus 2) “a girl is sitting on a bed, simultaneously rubbing herself, and reading *The Fermata* by Nicholson Baker” (see *Sample XXX Puzzle--Pin-up Land™ Cum-centraion*, 2013 at 6’20”). Noticing the book opens up your view of the image. This is liberating. The image is desexualized, neutralized at once.

This neutralization is primary.

I have been influenced by Agamben. My favorite parts are his dissections of Chloë des Lysses in *Profanations*, considering pornography as a place that allows for the overcoming of all social sep-



arations, not as a global phenomenon to be castigated or praised, censored or saved. **NS**

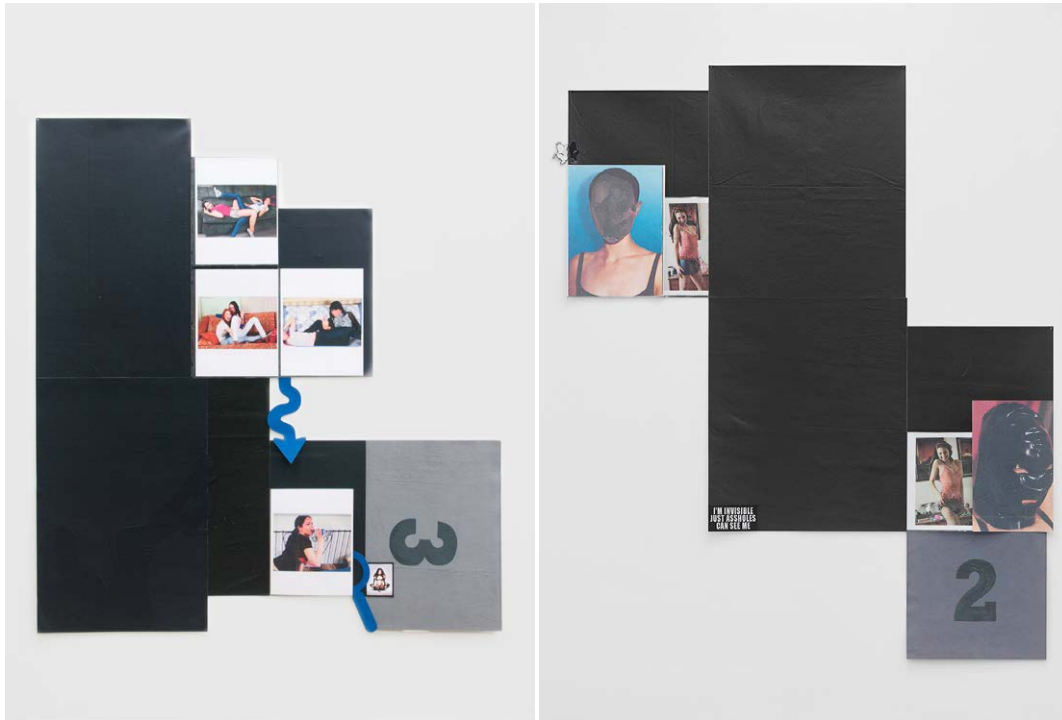
Since you brought up Agamben, let’s talk about the ethics of appropriation. The women depicted in your canvases stare back at the viewer with penetrating judgement and confidence rather than vulnerability, as if they do not intend to comply with spectators and their desire. Is this example of an indifferent expression a decisive factor in your selection process of images? **DB**

Yes. I often reread Agamben’s texts, especially those on Chloë des Lysses. He writes of her display of indifference, her inexpressivity, rendering inoperative the apparatus of pornography: her face, thus, appears as a “pure means.” (My favorite photograph of her is one in which she is petting a cat and being anally penetrated at the same time.)

# MOUSSE

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LIVING YOUR UNLIVED LIFE  
N. SIELEWICZ



Left - *Untitled (JeansLesbians)*, 2014  
Right - *I'm Invisible Just Assholes Can See Me*, 2014

All images - Courtesy: the artist and Room East, New York



Left - *Evil*, 2014  
Right, Top - "C6ld c6mf6rt" installation view at Room East, New York, 2014  
Right, Bottom - "Abnormcore" installation views at Room East, New York, 2014

**DARJA BAJAGIĆ**  
NEW GALERIE

# MOUSSE

The gaze of the girls in most of my images, staring back at the viewer, is also liberating. It is an entryway of a different sort into the image. Albeit briefly, it deactivates the event, the subject, and activates a new perspective. It is almost like a new life, really. I also like to think of it as saying: “The joke’s on you.”

**NS**

Speaking of recontextualization and deactivation of the imagery you encounter online and later use in your work, it made me think of the text “Further Materials Toward the Theory of a Hot Babe” by Hannah Black, where she describes the Babe as “the embodiment of the flatness and emptiness of the image,” almost a traceless non-subjectivity. Could you talk about the flatness of the images you use and the flatness of your paintings as framing devices?

**DB**

The flatness of my images rests on the belief that they will mean something else than—or in addition to—what they appear to mean: “pure, profane, free” (Agamben). Their deactivation occurs through a recontextualization as things on mostly monochrome backgrounds, leveling panels of canvas. I am led by the designs of Internet, magazine pages—display methods that generate particular seriality, understandings. Then I think about what would happen if the texts were emptied from those pages, or if they were subtly replaced by other texts, filled with misspellings perhaps, or incorrect translations. **NS**

Considering being lost in translation, there is an interesting case to be made about the particular socio-political and geographic context where we were born (Poland, Montenegro) in relation to import/export of porn from the region. I am talking here about the political backlash in former socialist states who entered free market in the nineties, having to deal with old traditionalist values on the one hand and the new social order of Turbocapitalism on the other. What I find interesting about your work is how it humorously infantilizes the Western fantasy surrounding Eastern European sexuality and desire—the wild Slavic vixen ready for all with her exuberant *jouissance*, the Russian mail-order bride, charming as long as she doesn’t bite back. I wonder if we can perceive your approach as a strategy that destabilizes or frustrates the Western male gaze? Could you elaborate on how it manifests itself in your work and perhaps why this is important to you in relation to Montenegro? **DB**

I do not dwell on conceptions of the “male” gaze, but on the “Western” gaze, perhaps.

Though I was born in Montenegro, I have a distant, strange relationship to that place, since I have not spent more than a single year there, all told. It was through ephemera and individuals that I became connected. So it is safe to say that my own gaze is a combination of both East and West.

I distinctly recall an event to which I could perhaps attribute the beginning of my real fascination with the East: meeting several beautiful Balkan girls in a girls’ bathroom, in ninth grade, who were shocked to hear that I was not aware of any of their favorite “turbo-folk” singers (such as Ceca Ražnatović, for example).

I was only able to caricaturize things from the homeland, mostly via Internet, confirming or disproving my fantasies with my mother.

In my own practice, those caricatures of the wild, Slavic vixen, and the Russian mail-order bride are presented as simultaneously false and true: it is this teetering that destabilizes and frustrates, since it is ultimately unfulfilling; it is available and there, but it is also neither of those things. An example is *Untitled (УМЕТОСТ НЕ ЗНА ЗА ГАРАНЦИЈЕ (ART does not know WARRANTY))*, 2014, (included in “Private Settings” at the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw): one of the images in the painting is a headshot of a well-circulated yet nonexistent Russian mail-order bride—one of the girls outed on the very helpful, informative Russian Detective website.

The existence of this possibility of a dual reading is vital. There is never a single perspective anyway. **NS**

We live in an era of radical self-expression, an attention economy in which we continuously obliterate the lines between act and authenticity. Browsing your Twitter account I noticed posts where you declare “Don’t call me babe, call me bitch” or “Angel by Day, Devil by Nighth” made me think of the provocative titles of your works, such as *How Badly Do You Want To See Me Hold My Pigtails Up?* What is the relationship between language and self-design in your work and your online persona? **DB**

I use Twitter for found sentences, words, and images (a conservative estimate would be that 80% of my tweets are sourced from elsewhere) that are usually representative of current themes. I do not necessarily think of my account as embodying a persona, though if I did, it would embody the persona of one of the girls in my images, or their collective identity.

A lot of my titles reflect my Twitter posts: “Angel By Day, Devil By Nighth” was taken from a misspelled iron-on patch I purchased online, and now it is also the title of a painting. The patch itself was included in the painting, too. (Other titles come from the filenames of images included in works, as they were found.) Text patches in the paintings read: “I’m Invisible Just Assholes Can See Me,” or “Enjoy Me I May Never Pass This Way Again.” I find it humorous to imagine the paintings as being the personified narrators of those lines, or the lines as new mottos for the girls, with the patches stuck next to them. Then there is the dry, cringing “Thanks For Looking”—is it sarcastic or sincere?

You are not sure whether to laugh or to cry.

by Natalia Sielewicz

# VULTURE

Excerpt from

## THE 19 BEST ART SHOWS OF 2014

by Jerry Saltz

### 6. Darja Bajagic, “C6ld C6mf6rt,” at Room East

This debut solo show is by an artist who says the dean of the Yale School of Art called her “crazy” and claimed that she was sick for “being okay, as a woman, with these kinds of images even existing in the world, let alone propelling them in paintings and in the gallery system.” Bajagic harnessed dark forces in paintings and shadowy collages that bring together sex, violence, loneliness, fantasy, and imagination, and in one show, she joined the artists Elaine Cameron-Weir, Andra Ursuta, Dawn Kasper, Lucy Dodd, and others in a strain of feminism that takes no prisoners and is thankfully and unapologetically upon us.



# ARTILLERY

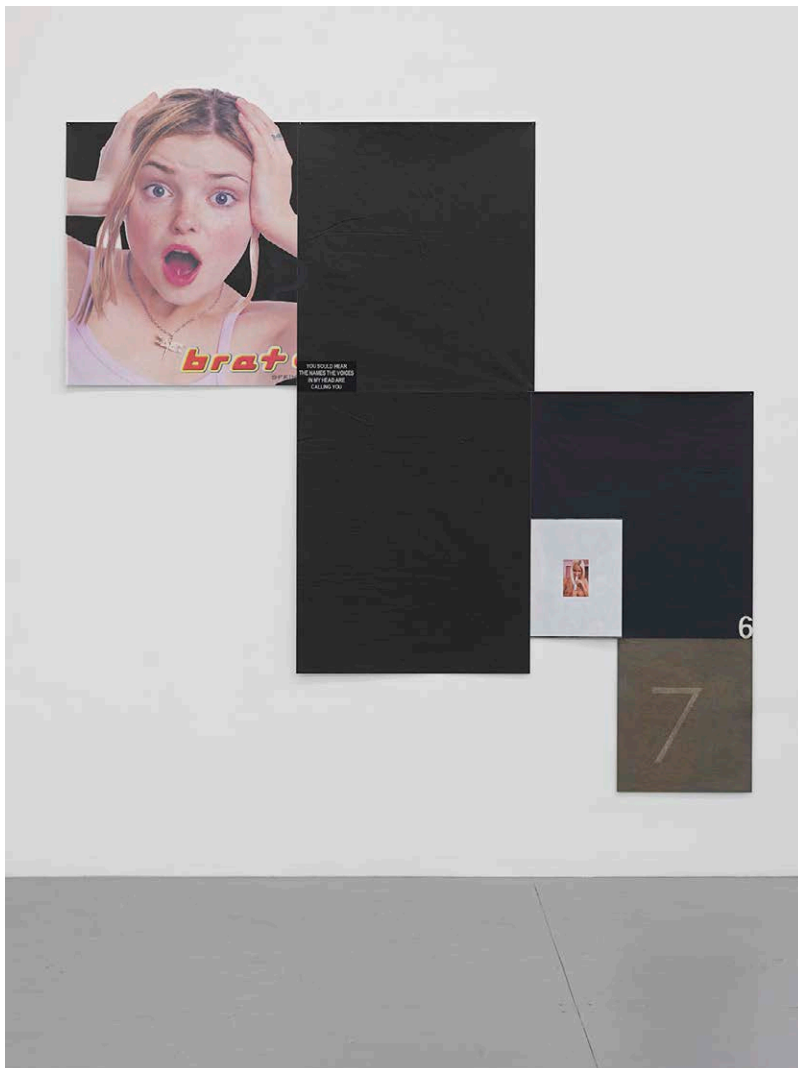
## DARJA BAJAGIĆ, ROOM EAST / NEW YORK

by Bansie Vasvani

Showcasing appropriated images of young girls alongside pornography from niche fetish websites in her daring mixed-media works, Darja Bajagić's solo exhibition offers "Cold Comfort," as the show's title so aptly indicates. The recent Yale MFA grad stirred controversy in the halls of that venerated school for her work's seemingly apolitical stance on this taboo. Accused of irresponsibly promulgating pornography instead of steering away from it, Bajagić compels the viewer to confront the societal proscription of her subject matter.

In *You Should Hear the Names the Voices In My Head Are Calling You* (2014), a picture of a young girl, her mouth wide open, stares mockingly at the viewer. Diagonally opposite, a smaller porn image of a topless woman holding a dildo between her breasts looks on seductively. The word "brat," which refers to a '90s zine that voiced a critical youth perspective on politics and culture, emblazons the asymmetrical black canvas panels affixed with these lurid images of youth and the sex trade and upends our assumptions about female sexuality.

Similarly, in *Come To The Dark Side We Have Cookies* (2014), a provocative picture of a woman is mostly concealed behind black canvas flaps that can be raised to reveal the entire image. This element of furtiveness, derived from the flaps, recalls the secrecy of peep shows in the '70s and suggests the forbidding and darker side of the sex trade, just as much as the invisible faces covered by a black scarf and ski mask hint at danger and violence in *I'm Invisible Just Assholes Can See Me* (2014). These images of sexual innuendo are juxtaposed with pictures of debonair young girls in camisoles reminiscent of an underaged Nabokovian Lolita. Bajagić's deliberate combination of innocence and carnal allure points to her larger concern about the objectification of the female body.



Yet her union of spare black canvases with sensational female images removed from their original context highlights Bajagić's strategy to neutralize and desexualize pornography. Empowered by their ability to look the viewer in the eye, these commodified women are presented in a new light. Their gaze is directed at the perpetrator, whose prurient interest is met from a position of refusal and mockery. By entering a previously male domain, Bajagić situates her work outside the voyeuristic concern. And by employing shocking and unsettling captions, she allows the viewer to accept the severity of the imagery and cue its interpretation.

Unlike the painter Sue Williams, whose cartoonish imagery often subdued the sexual violence she was confronting, Bajagić's female figures bring our attention closer to the discomfort of her mission. Not always aesthetically pleasing or easily acceptable, her work has the strength of creating a new place for the ostracized other, and chips away at preconceived notions of taboo.

Ultimately, Bajagić's own experience as the outsider—from her birth in Montenegro, upbringing in Egypt, and emigration to the U.S. at the age of nine—places her in a strong position to rebut instead of accept social alienation for herself as much as for the deprecated women she champions.

## WHY DARJA BAJAGIĆ APPROPRIATES PORN AND SERIAL KILLER ART

By Christie Chu

Hot on the heels of her graduation from Yale's painting MFA program, her first solo show on the Lower East Side at ROOM EAST, an upcoming group show at the Museum of Modern Art in Warsaw, and a rave review from New York magazine's Jerry Saltz, Darja Bajagić is without question an emerging artist to watch out for. Just 24 years old, the Montenegro-born, New York-based artist has been a nomad since childhood, living in cities including Cairo and Chicago. Her work, which incorporates pornographic imagery and serial killer "murderabilia," seems to be the beginning of a career that will surely garner a lot of the attention from the art world and the Internet.

Even before graduating, Bajagić was already whipping up controversy within the Yale MFA department, albeit unintentionally. The head of the department, art historian Robert Storr, had such a problem with her use of pornography that he called her crazy and suggested she go to therapy on Yale's budget. Her interest in pornography, Bajagić says, is primarily cultural. She recalls her earlier works as being stylistically minimal, but she eventually sought to merge the conventions of painting and porn. By employing certain compositional strategies she wants to prod viewers into deconstructing her images, rather than simply seeing pornographic photos laden with gendered meaning, or focusing on why a female artist would be interested in pornography in the first place.

Her artwork opens up conversations on complex issues such as power struggles between the sexes, censorship, authorship, and the digital landscape. Her work elicits a broad spectrum of reactions and reviews that range from cautiously positive to harshly negative. But to say of her work's success that "sex sells" or "it's for shock value" would be reductive.

Growing up antisocial and with access to Web TV (an almost ancient way of accessing the Internet), there were only a few things to do: watch game shows and sports, or go on chat rooms. As a girl in her early teens, living in a very protective household, the artist made up several profiles of characters she would play online. Thus began her interest in collecting sexy or raunchy images of women. Her fascination with concealment and misdirection, something that is easily achieved through the Internet, is a common theme permeating her work. Bajagić's more recent, multi-layered flap paintings flanked with laser cut-outs and patches purchased on eBay, as well as her serial killer art pieces (some of which contain information no one can see without altering the piece's composition), speak to this idea.

But again, why does she want to incorporate serial killer art? The artist says that after the adversity she encountered at Yale, she felt it wasn't anyone's place to say what kind of art a person should make. In fact, the department's consistent negative critique of her practice helped fuel her appetite for making this type of work. One of her series juxtaposes the memorabilia she buys online at sites like Serialkillersink.net (a very controversial website) with images of a former Soviet surveillance agency director's country home—where he kept his stash of illegal pornography. Such pieces question whether authority figures (let alone laypeople) should be given the power to pass judgement on who can and cannot make art.

Bajagić follows the generation of contemporary artists who first appropriated others' imagery to make it their own—Richard Prince immediately comes to mind—but her work most certainly isn't something you've seen before. It isn't safe or pretty, and it forces viewers to face the most taboo, perverse, trashy, and fetishistic parts of our culture, an alternate world seemingly so distant, but lurking just a click away. While not many people want to aesthetically and conceptually engage with her work—perhaps because they can't relate to porn stars and inmates, or simply from fear of things outside their comfort zone—the dialogue it creates will endure when most art simply aims to please.

What's next for the rising artist? Besides working on her art, she will be collaborating with Oliver Vereker on the artwork for the second release from his experimental, noise-techno label, Endangered Species, slated for November. The music is his own, while the image set to accompany Vereker's music is of Natalie Portman's scratched out face, taken from Bajagić's piece I'm Invisible Just Assholes Can See Me. Between his sonic tendencies and her artwork's satanic references, the pairing evokes a scene like the opening club sequence in Stephen Norrington's vampiric cult classic, *Blade* (1998)—minus the blood shower.





# VULTURE

Excerpt from

## **JERRY SALTZ DIVES INTO THE LOWER EAST SIDE ART SCENE AND EMERGES OPTIMISTIC**

by Jerry Saltz

Last week on the Lower East Side, the art galleries opened the 2014-2015 season in a bigger, more viable, and better place. New arrivals have landed; start-ups of the past few years have taken wonderful root; artists are sticking with their galleries rather than going to the burly shores of megagalleries. At this stage in its development, the 1980s DIY East Village scene saw mass artist defections to Soho powerhouses, and galleries decamping there as well. But here in the Lower East Side, shows and spaces have improved in the past year or so.

This may have less to do with the art getting better than that the type of work shown here has started influencing taste and ideas across the map — indeed, one of the most annoying recent trends, the muted abstract look-alike painting I've been calling zombie formalism, got a start in this hothouse. This phenomenon tells us that the Lower East Side is now far more than just not Chelsea. Art isn't better here than everywhere else; the neighborhood isn't purer; in fact, the rents are higher on the Lower East Side than on the Upper East Side. Still, the clouds of commerce don't feel as portentous here. And yet two days ago, standing outside his Broome Street gallery, Canada, Phil Grauer mused, "Can we keep going? Is this phase over? When will everyone start hating this scene?" Snickering, I said, "We've already starting hating you. Which tells you that you all must be doing something right."

...

Hands down, the most promising young artist I saw last Sunday was 25-year-old Darja Bajagic at Room East. We get shaped asymmetrical assemblages that use painted and printed canvas, letters of prisoners who write to young women who write to them, and clipped images from *Brat* magazine that cater to men who fetishize pubescent girls and the girls who want to be fetishized. There's a drawing from a serial killer and decals of busty she-devils firing guns and buxom angels who only hold them. It's hellfire voodooed beautiful and a delve into the cursed and excommunicated who still live in society looking for ways to express their yearnings. These yearnings can rub people raw or the wrong way, as Bajagic knows. In a recent interview, she said that after meeting with Robert Storr, dean of the Yale Art School, "he literally told me I was crazy ... that Yale would pay for all of my counseling and therapy ... to seek help for my obsessive-compulsive behavioral habits of collecting images of girls and porn ... that I should look deep inside of myself to figure out what are the problems I have with myself, as a woman, for being O.K. with these kinds of images even existing in the world, let alone propelling them in paintings and in the gallery system."

Storr was right in one respect: Bajagic is harnessing a dark force that is with us all the time, an image world never more than a click away, one that shadows everything we do, a world of predator, prey, the haunted, transformative forces of sex, violence, loneliness, fantasy, and imaginations that can't formulate spaces not threatening. With this show, Bajagic is joining fellow female artists Cameron-Weir, Andra Ursuta, Dawn Kasper, Lucy Dodd, and others too numerous to mention; a beautiful strain of feminism that takes no prisoners is upon us.