

ART SPIEL

Reflections on the work of contemporary artists

APRIL 16, 2021 BY ANNA MIKAELA EKSTRAND

Katya Grokhovsky: FANTASYLAND at Smack Mellon

In Dialogue with Katya Grokhovsky



Katya Grokhovsky, Fantasyland, 2021. Images courtesy of Smack Mellon. Photos: Etienne Frossard

Katya Grokhovsky 's site-specific installation *FANTASYLAND* at Smack Mellon explores the rise and fall of a fantastical empire and its uncertain future. Giant plush toys, inflatable beach balls, deconstructed and re-assembled mannequins, an unfinished carousel structure, recycled parachute canopies, wallpaper, a glowing neon sign, and performance videos, altogether underscore American society's surplus of objects, and unbridled desire for material possessions, ironically, the capitalist symbol of freedom. The artist scrutinizes the American Dream through an immigrant lens, exposing a desirable yet unattainable mirage. Katya Grokhovsky's work is currently on view in the solo exhibition *FANTASYLAND* at Smack Mellon, through May 2nd, 2021.



Katya Grokhovsky, Fantasyland, 2021. Images courtesy of Smack Mellon. Photos: Etienne Frossard

AME: *FANTASYLAND* combines large-scale site-specific installation, including reworked or upcycled sculptures from your previous shows – fiber, found objects, painting and video. It is a magnificently multimedia show, how do you perceive individual mediums and move between them?

KG: I focus on materiality, physicality and the immersive nature of installation in a holistic manner, employing many mediums to serve one goal, which is to create an experience and ignite a conversation. Each material and object used in *FANTASYLAND* plays a specifically assigned role of seduction, repulsion, visual pleasure, saturation, disgust, surprise, etc responding to the site and the overall idea of a fictional and dysfunctional, emotionally upcycled theme park, which is the core of this installation. I am interested in how I can harness the aura of the space as well as intervene, explore, respond and evoke, through re-use and re-assemblage of previous and new works.

AME: The exhibition explores consumerism, capitalism and the construct of the U.S through the eyes of an immigrant. Can you talk about your relationship to Consumerism in your work?

KG: I was born in former Soviet Ukraine, so Capitalism was a beacon of “a better” world somewhere on the other side. I am interested in the idea of a “greener grass” of promise and the call of opportunity as well as the concept of excess through the looped cycle of want and temporary satisfaction. In *FANTASYLAND* specifically, I am exploring the consumer culture and its connotations through a combination of objects and materials and the way our own desires control and imprison us. The exhibition is a culminating chapter in a series of works, which explore the American Dream through indoctrination into Consumerism as an immigrant, who is grappling with the idea of the U.S as a new home.



Katya Grokhovsky, Bad Woman, 2017, performance for video, still

AME: The feminist video work *Bad Woman* (2017) has been on view in multiple shows, and is included in *FANTASYLAND*. What stereotypes does it investigate and thwart, and what does feminism mean in your practice?

KG: Feminism has saved my life and it underpins my practice in many ways. *Bad Woman* is a persona, born in 2017 after Trump was elected, as a reaction, a lurking shadow of rage living in my subconsciousness. She subverts the male gaze and thwarts the stereotype of an “unmarried childless old maid”, as a fully developed and complete being, her own absolute Queen, ruling her own world. In *FANTASYLAND*, she is one of the first video-sculptures you encounter and is one of the most prominent inhabitants of my land.

AME: You are collaborating with other artists on the new closing performance of *FANTASYLAND*, titled *Becoming American*. Can you talk about these collaborations and what role does performance play in this exhibition?

KG: Performance is one of the many mediums I work with consistently. In *FANTASYLAND*, performative gestures occur throughout, in three video works as well as sculpturally. *Becoming American* is part of a new body of work, which grew

out of my changing immigration status and the concept of becoming a part of this country for the rest of my life. The live performance continues the research into the meaning of acquiring a new identity, through sound, dance, movement, text and costume. I am collaborating with multidisciplinary artist Sarah Martin-Nuss, who is creating a new sound work and dancer Lilach Orenstein, who will interpret alienation, migration and loneliness through movement in the installation. The work explores my relationship to the U.S as a double immigrant and activates my past, in order to experience my present and contemplate my future.



Katya Grokhovsky, Fantasyland, 2021. Images courtesy of Smack Mellon. Photos: Etienne Frossard

AME: FANTASYLAND marks your ninth solo show. What about the exhibition process excites, elates, and brings you the most joy?

KG: I truly enjoy exhibiting my work. it is stressful, challenging, taxing and exhausting but also exhilarating every single time and I intend to keep going until the very end. I enjoy and agonize over that moment when I have to release the work

from my care in the studio and it eventually hits the public eye. Once the exhibitions are on view, I learn significantly from the feedback loop, regardless how critical it can get. Afterwards, I am of course never satisfied and I go back to the drawing board and move forward.

AME: You have a background in Fashion Design. Art vs. Fashion, what are the differences and does the fashion world impact you now?

KG: I used to be obsessed with Fashion itself, but I never loved the industry and rebelled against it in my work. However, I learned a lot from studying and attempting to practice it a little bit, especially in regard to color theory, material use, textile science, sewing and marketing. Art and Fashion can feed off each other, but they are quite different. I have toyed with an idea of establishing my own fashion label from time to time and even started working on some ideas during the lockdown again, but I realize I am just not interested in the business of it. My first ever installation was constructed from the last collection I ever made as a fashion designer. The possibilities seemed endless and liberating, once I wasn't thinking of function and the body. Art freed my mind. In my first ever performance as a BFA student, I cut my long hair off in front of an audience and I began a lifelong deconditioning process and shedding of everything society as well as fashion Industry taught me.

AME: This has been a challenging year for us all – how has the lockdown impacted your practice? You made new digital paintings, worked together with AI software, and have created several performances for Zoom and Instagram. Tell us more about these processes.

KG: In 2020 I started working much more with digital and virtual tools. I digitally painted and collaged a new body of work called Postcards from America, remixing images of vintage theme park snapshots, some of which are included in the wall mural in *FANTASYLAND*. The new performance works were made for online audiences and included experimentations with technology and time. I took part in a digital residency with Playform, a platform, where you can generate images in collaboration with AI software, which I really enjoyed and am still employing to sketch out ideas. I am now also exploring the NFT world. Looking back, despite a

difficult and fearful time, I did manage to expand my practice and gain new valuable skills and knowledge.



Katya Grokhovsky, Fantasyland, 2021. Images courtesy of Smack Mellon. Photos: Etienne Frossard

**AME: Which people/artists, contexts, and ideas shape your support system?
Alive or deceased, physical or ethereal.**

KG: My core support system starts with my parents, Tanya and Ross, who have been my private cheerleaders from the very start, as well as several close core artist friends, who know my work and my life very well. I tend to also look to creative and spiritual guidance from some of my favorite artists such as Ana Mendieta, Louise Bourgeois, Eva Hesse, Phyllida Barlow, William Pope. L, Mike Kelley, and many others. Reading and writing have been significant activities in my life. I grew up with Virginal Woolf, Nabokov, George Sand, Brontë sisters, Gogol, Tolstoy, Chekhov. Right now I am reading Roxane Gay, bell hooks, Rebecca Solnit. I am also interested in otherworldly ancestral energies that are around us which I communicate with and ask for guidance, especially when I need to conjure up the

most energy and courage to make my work.

AME: This exhibition has been in process for several years now and has been postponed due to Covid. Now that it is finally on view, what are you working on next?

KG: *FANTASYLAND* is a closing chapter in a series of solo exhibitions, which employed the process of reassembling of the same objects and materials as well as mobility as uniting principle in exploring Capitalism and the American society. As I am now stabilizing my life in the U.S with a view of becoming a citizen, I am also thinking of my artistic legacy and permanency. I am interested in exploring new, lasting and archival materials in my sculptural works as well as focusing on paintings which continue the exploration of consumerism and desire in a new way.

Katya Grokhovsky: *FANTASYLAND* at Smack Mellon, March 20th – May 2nd 2021

Artist Talk: April 18th 2021 3pm; Performance: May 1st 2021 4pm

Gallery One Smack Mellon, 92 Plymouth St, Brooklyn, NY 11201

Anna Mikaela Ekstrand is an independent curator and the founding editor-in-chief of Cultbytes. She is interested in feminism, decolonial theory, and social practice. Currently, Anna Mikaela serves on the core curatorial team for the inaugural 'The Immigrant Artist Biennial' presenting over 75 artists. She has also held curatorial positions at the Metropolitan Museum, Museum of Arts and Design, Solomon R. Guggenheim, and Bard Graduate Center. She holds dual Master's Degrees in Art and Design History from Stockholm University and Bard Graduate Center.

 **IN DIALOGUE**

#FANTASYLAND, #KATYAGOKHOVSKY, #SMACKMELLON, ARTSPIEL

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