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Katya Grokhovsky on FANTASYLAND and a Decade of Making and Migrating

Rachel Vera Steinberg, <https://cultbytes.com/author/rachelverasteinberg/>
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Katya Grokhovskiy, *FANTASYLAND*, 2021. Photographed by Walter Włodarczyk

FANTASYLAND, Katya Gorkhovsky's current installation at Smack Mellon, is a sprawling environment of gigantic beach balls, hand-dyed vintage airplane parachutes, an abstracted carousel structure, and a custom neon sign peppered with the artist's more well-known sculptures and performance videos. The space comes together to create a vision of U.S. American theme parks, equal parts playful and grotesque, that seem uncomfortably overinflated in their own delight of saccharine consumerism. Like much of Gorkhovsky's recent work, this exhibition takes a sardonic look at U.S. American consumer culture, stemming from her own feminist roots and experiences of migration.

Rachel Vera Steinberg has worked with Grokhowsky on and off since 2015, and talks to her here about the evolution of her practice, her current exhibition, and the urgent and ongoing issues that she has addressed in her work for the past decade.

Rachael Vera Steinberg: I wanted to start by talking about the exhibition, which takes the form as a playfully psychotic carnivalesque space that you call *FANTASYLAND*. Embedded in the installation—quite literally strapped to your sculptures—are performance videos that you have made over the past few years. In each one you play with the conditional categories of identity that you are continually faced with, as seen in the video work *Bad Woman* and your upcoming performance *Becoming American*. How did you develop *FANTASYLAND* as a space, and how does it hold space for these identities?

Kyrga Grohmann To me, *FANTASYLAND* signifies a contrast of the U.S.A and presents an image of a deceiving, grotesque, homogeneous mass park. A sort of saccharine, yet nihilistic, fictional, and absurd place, with a dark underbelly. Having lived here for almost eleven years and eventually migrating here, I am both disillusioned and still enchanted by America. *FANTASYLAND* is my distorted view of this country I now call home. I have always been fascinated by these parks, partially because I did not grow up with them. I did not live until I migrated to the West. Disneyland was one of the first places I visited when I came to the U.S at 20 years of age. During my studies in Fashion Design in Australia, I traveled to Los Angeles to partake in an internship in Hollywood at a costume department in Warner Bros studio. I remember being fascinated by the essence of Disneyland, "The Happiest Place on Earth," as well as the rampant consumer and materialist show-boiz culture I was experiencing in L.A and in Hollywood. Coming originally from Soviet Union, this culture of abundance was new and exciting and still resonates with me years later.



Katya Grokhovskiy, FANTASYLAND, 2021. Photographed by Walter Wlodarczyk

RVS: I also wanted to talk about the role that migration plays in your work. You are the founder of the Immigrant Artist Biennial and you have migrated halfway around the world multiple times in your life. As you and I have discussed, this immigrant mindset has material consequences on your practice, and as a result your work heavily utilizes materials that are transient and re-usable. Can you talk more about your relationship to physical displacement and material goods, and how that relates specifically to your experience in the United States?

KG: Migration and all it implies being a big part of my adult life and is one of the ongoing themes I work with. I am a double immigrant, from Ukraine to Australia, Australia to the U.S. and I have also lived in various European countries before settling here. As someone who had to move a lot and lose everything I buried several times in my life, I was forced to learn how to detach and accept consistently. Consequently, I became an accumulator and a collector of materials and objects, which eventually have acquired sentimental value and become a part of my life. In this way, I tend to gravitate towards fabrics, linens and toys, as well as discarded furniture parts. I am interested in intersections and juxtaposition of processed goods with ethically sourced items, such as giant beach balls, and what they mean to us in everyday life. I do get attached emotionally, almost vicariously to these and often cannot let go. I recycle and re-use my creations consistently with forms either crystalline into shapes I love or I am ready to discard them and travel onward, hence minimizing migration itself through my practice.

RVS: I wanted to talk again about your video works, and the video *Bad Woman* in particular. I consider this to be an iconic piece, which has appeared in different forms in various installations and exhibitions over the years. What is the significance of this video in your work, and what does it mean for you to be a "bad woman," both within this context and cross-culturally?

KG: Bud Wernick is one of my all-time heroes. The video revolves around a character which I developed in early 2007, in reaction to Bush being elected president. I was going through another crisis at the time and was approaching a decision about eventually applying for a Green Card and living permanently in the U.S and I was anxious. I went to Australia and spent three months in my parents' house in Melbourne suburbs, where Bud Wernick was created. She is a product of my lifelong female rage, a rapist, a steadfast clown, an alter ego. She is timeless and inhabits her own reality; a sum of many parts, she is lurking in my subconscious, a Queen of the horror, forever lodged in her trauma. The video was made in my parents' backyard, with assembled objects and furniture parts, from my past life as a teenager and a young woman, stored in the garage. She sat upon my aunt's car stereo, she wore my mother's nightgown and my grandmother's lake for socks. I also often perform her live and she has been featured in my art installations, which I present on difficult themes. Bud Wernick is an on-screen, an on-stage, an on-screen, an on-stage. Culturally, I am a bad woman, who wishes to promote or get married or even have a partner and loves quite a singular culture. Ah, I am a huge laugh head to achieve.

Katya Grokhovskiy, *Bad Women*, 2017, video still. Photograph courtesy of the artist.

RVS: Your most recent video, *Becoming American*, will also become a performance that you will stage on May 1, 2021 at Smack Mellon. For this you are working with a dancer (Ulrich Oreslein) and another artist (Sarah Martin-Nuss) who has created a sound piece for this performance. Can you speak more to this process of collaboration and how has your performance practice shifted over the years?

My becoming American is a recent concept that came up as I was going through immigration towards permanent residency within the last two years here. The work is focused on a homeless, nonverbal immigrant, a new person who is locked into a perpetual state of being or migrating, unable to cross the border. A musing/concept of constructing a new place and identity, yet again, which never quite reaches the form. The character is alienated and in search of place and belonging in a world that is not his. A month or so ago, I was contacted by the DPA (Disability Project) at the American Dance Theater, where the video was filmed. The two performers used the existing dancing notion of the American Dream, ideas of loneliness and longing, and uncertainty about the future. The video was made in a month or so, and I was able to work with the dancers to create a story of a person who is lost and reaching out to other artists and creative practitioners, in order to broaden the scope of my work practice. I think it is essential for growth and evolution, especially today, as we have all experienced so much social isolation, to open up to new avenues of experimentation and to move forward and beyond my own process and capabilities. So for collaborating with Lachar and the dancers, I am grateful. I am also grateful to the American Dance Theater for providing me with the space, the input and use of my work, and I am excited about the future opportunities of staging larger collaborative, multimedia works.

Katusa Gombosi and FANTASY AND 2001. Photographed by Walter Blüder.

RVS: Finally, I want to ask you to speak about this exhibition as a culmination of a long series of works that you have been slowly developing since you moved to the United States. How does this exhibition mark this period of time for you, and what are you hoping to explore from here in your work?

KG: This particular exhibition marks 10 years since I graduated from my MFA and moved to NYC. I have established a particular style of working, which is based on economics and lack of storage and my own torn and shared interest in migration, religion, and time immemorial. I have developed and recorded and I have created and I am creating and I am creating and I am creating concepts. This kind of ephemeral process of making and migrating works from show to show has naturally come full circle for me in *FANTASYLAND* and coincided with the change in my immigration status. I feel stable for the first time in a decade and unable to stand still. I am home and have found the place. I feel I can now stop reassembling and deconstructing everything I create and focus on stabilizing my legacy and securing my future through permanency. I am now invested in materials which can be collected and can outlive my own physical life. I am fully signing up to capitalism, in order to survive it. When I

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