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A Paradise Lost: Immigrant Artist Katya Grokhovsky Recreates America - FANTASYLAND, at Smack Mellon

By **Alexander Si**



Katya Grokhovsky, *Fantasyland*, 2021, photo Walter Wlodarczyk.

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Katya Grokhovsky, *Fantasyland*, 2021, photo Walter Wlodarczyk.

Katya Grokhovsky's site-specific installation *FANTASYLAND* at Smack Mellon explores the

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rise and fall of a fantastical empire and its uncertain future. The artist scrutinizes the American Dream through an immigrant lens, exposing a desirable yet unattainable mirage.

Katya Grokhovsky and I met during my fellowship at the Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts (EFA). I had the chance to interview EFA's current artists-in-residence. Grokhovsky was one of the first people I reached out to. She gave me a rare glimpse into her studio and the chance to document the installation process on-site. Through working together, I was drawn to the consistency and dedication in her practice; as well as to the vision and ambition for her seminal solo exhibition FANTASYLAND at Smack Mellon, which acts as a summation of many motifs and topics Grokhovsky has explored over the years. From performance, sculpture, video, painting to collage and installation, the show's intersectionality highlights the breadth of her practice and paints a comprehensive yet complex picture of the modern American landscape experienced by an immigrant femme body.



AS: *There's such a dystopian quality in FANTASYLAND, a paradise lost, which feels especially eerie as America is slowly coming out of the last four years of political mayhem. How long have you been conceptualizing this exhibition? What inspired and motivated you to put this vision together?*

KG: I am interested in the idea of the American dream and the failing state of Capitalism overall and I deal with these subjects consistently through a variety of media. FANTASYLAND has been in the process for a few years and was inspired both by the political climate and the pandemic. The exhibition has been postponed from 2020 and has gone through numerous iterations. The ideas of lost paradise, deflated promises and tainted optimism pulse throughout the mixed media installation, which resembles an abandoned, decaying theme park, situated in the alternate, grotesque universe.

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AS: *Beach balls, mannequins, soft toys are some of the leitmotifs that have been present in your work in the last few years. What drew you to these specific objects?*

I get obsessed with certain materials and objects for a period of time and for the last few years I have become increasingly interested in working with mass produced consumer goods and novelty items such as teddy bears, inflatable pool toys, dollar store bags, giant beach balls, paper plates, etc. I like to juxtapose these with plaster, paint, found textiles, etc in order to push the boundaries of sculptural and installation practice and explore our relationship with materialist values.



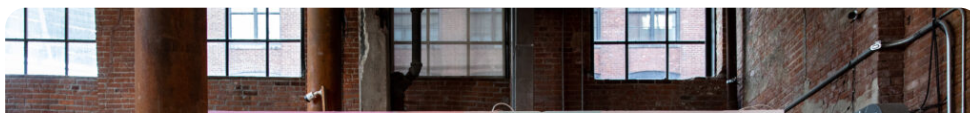
Install in progress. Photographed by Alexander Sil.

AS: The yards of fabric draping from the ceiling and on top of the sculptures and beach balls look at times like a circus tent, a flowy dress, or draped over a giant beach ball, a shell of a snail, yet the strings piling on the floor from these fiber works suggest they could be parachute canopies. Are they actually parachutes and why did you decide to employ them in this installation, and to have them draped and dyed in this way?

KG: I bought six used vintage parachute canopies of various sizes, ranging from 60 feet to 2 feet long on eBay and decided to partially dye them in different colors and hang them from the ceiling. The industrial quality of the space dictated this decision, as I was thinking of creating a site-specific work, feminizing the space and exploring the possibilities of height. The choice of parachutes as material came from my thought process about impossibility of escape during the onset of the global pandemic and the feeling of lifeless deflation of hopes of the future, mimicked in the limp fabric of an object, which could once fly. I am curious about the structure and use of these particular objects as well as their imagined prior history. There is an idea of post-performance fatigue and failure prevalent in these works. The color scheme is uniform throughout the installation, focusing on pastel, slightly saccharine, attractive candy tones, employed to lull and seduce you into a false sense of comfort and joy.

AS: The printed and painted murals on the walls also add another layer to the exhibition. As a viewer, it's hard to decipher what the specific source images are. One can only make out strokes of paint and abstract/glitched out shapes. What inspired you to use this way of collaging?

KG: The wall murals extend the element of immersive experience of the installation and the images I remixed come from the series of digital collages and paintings I was working on during lockdown. Titled Postcards from America, the works are based on vintage snapshots of theme parks as well as families posing with costumed Disney characters. The mixed media murals create illusions and snippets of abstracted, faded memories, unfulfilled wishes and ghostly shadows and bodies, which inhabit FANTASYLAND.





AS: *The way you embedded video works in sculptures provides another interesting mode of interaction, bringing television and media into the dialogue of the consumerist dystopia. I was surprised to learn that you recycled the outfits and objects used in your prior performances and installations into the three sculptures that display the videos. Could you talk about your thought process of recycling those materials and mounting the TV monitors inside these specific works?*

KG: By embedding several of my recent video works, in which I perform my alter ego characters, who are now residents of this theme park, directly into the sculptures, I am weaving a cohesive narrative of mediums and characters together. Constructing a singular, upcycled world, imbued with the aura and echoes of past lives of these materials and fragments of their previous iterations and ambitions, the installation is a culmination of many of my experiments. Arising from years of lived and wished-for experience in the world as an immigrant female artist, FANTASYLAND presents a dreamscape, a nightmarish scenario of post-American landscape.

To see more of Katya Grokhovskiy's work visit her website or follow her on Instagram.

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By **Alexander Si**

Alexander Si is a multidisciplinary artist, curator, and publisher based in Chinatown, New York, NY. He holds two honor BAs in Architecture and Media Studies at the University of Toronto, and an MFA at the School of Visual Arts. Si has been included in various exhibitions with galleries and institutions like Tutu Gallery, Satellite Art Club, Chinatown Soup, Spring/Break, and Visual Aids. Si is also the founder and director of 24EBroadway, a project space located in Chinatown that curates exhibitions, produces publications, community workshops, and interviews.

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