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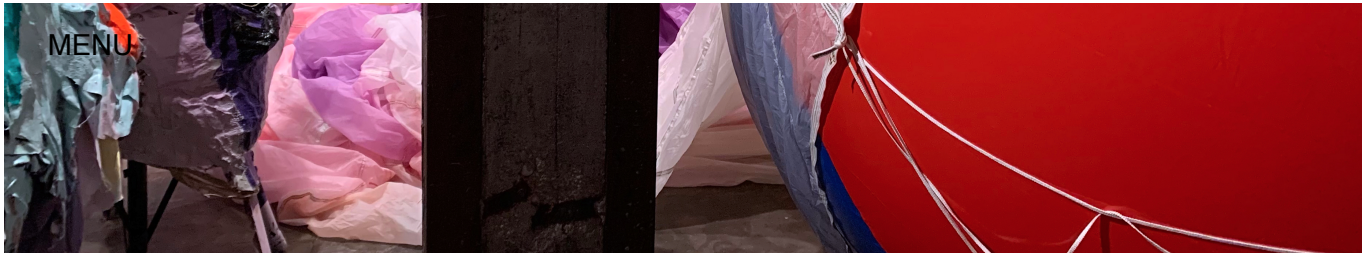
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"THE BEST ART IN THE WORLD"

Katya Grokhovsky: FANTASYLAND at Smack Mellon





Katya Grokhovsky, FANTASYLAND, 2021. Installation photo. Courtesy of Smack Mellon.

Katya Grokhovsky (<https://www.katyagrokhovsky.net/>): *FANTASYLAND*

Smack Mellon (<http://www.smackmellon.org/exhibition/katya-grokhovsky-fantasyland/>)

March 20 through May 2, 2021

By VITTORIA BENZINE, March 2021

When building beauty, focus on positive space. Popular concepts of creation deal predominantly in regular matter, which only accounts for 31% of all matter in the universe, according to researchers at UC Riverside (<https://news.ucr.edu/articles/2020/09/28/scientists-precisely-measure-total-amount-matter-universe>). Materials are scarce, and according to the market, desirable. There's beauty even in the mundane. Such determinations might arise from a traipse through 'FANTASYLAND' the latest exhibition from New York-based artist and curator Katya Grokhovsky, now on view at Smack Mellon (<http://www.smackmellon.org/exhibition/katya-grokhovsky-fantasyland/>) in Dumbo, Brooklyn.

A press release from the gallery calls this show “a site-specific mixed media installation that explores the rise and fall of a fantastical empire and its uncertain future.” The artist's own statement (<https://www.katyagrokhovsky.net/statement>) explains that “Many of her projects deal with protest and freedom through failure, via radical and humorous actions: reclaiming the body through pleasure, chaos and refusal, residing in the space of absurd grotesque and nostalgic kitsch.”

Immigration and displacement are also consistent motifs throughout Grokhovsky's body of work. “Once an immigrant, always an immigrant,” she told me in her studio. “My whole adult life, I've been an immigrant.” At fourteen, she and her family moved from the collapsed Soviet Union to Australia to meet relatives, making lifelong friends on the plane with fellow strangers seeking new futures.

“Art is like my country,” she explained. “I think this show is very much a creation of a space, an environment, a world—it’s fantastical and kind of absurd and pleasurable.” As such, she lives through and amongst her materials, a conglomerate of souvenirs and mass-produced Hallmark paraphernalia, paint clotting teddy bear fur and gloves blooming from inanimate heaps. “I have a problem with letting things go, hence, a lot of stuff,” she joked. Many of the components comprising ‘FANTASYLAND’ are up-cycled remnants from former projects.

As a young adult artist, she recalled, “I first went into fashion design, a compromise, to get a job. Grokhovsky studied at the prestigious Central Saint Martins in London, and counts Vivien Westwood, Comme des Garçons, and Alexander McQueen as inspirations.

The act of ‘making’ has strong central roots in Grokhovsky’s practice. “I remember making absolutely insane collections,” she said. “My professors in design school were like, ‘you’re an artist.’” Her work proved more performance than prêt-à-porter. One time she put a tree trunk on a model.



Katya Grokhovsky, FANTASYLAND, 2021. Installation photo. Courtesy of Smack Mellon.

When she first moved from the Ukraine to Australia, Grokhovsky struggled to stomach her first shopping mall. “I fainted from overstimulation,” she recalled. “The music, the smell, the lights.” She had to build a tolerance for the experience. “Something about that overstimulation is definitely in my work. It's disgust, but also attraction.”

Grokhovsky's practice continually processes her outward observations through the lens of her inner sensibilities—whimsical, but self-assured. ‘FANTASYLAND’ deals with America, the country Grokhovsky fell for after years on the road, a place at once violently negligent and fast-paced, filled with opportunity. She considers consumerism one the most omniscient forces that abounds. “Having lived in many different countries, this is the worst,” she noted. “I've never seen anything like this. But it's also so convenient.”

“It looks happy, but there's a lot of fight and a lot of darkness,” Grokhovsky said of the work throughout ‘FANTASYLAND.’ “I think that's part of consumerism, it is attractive.”

The more she learns about the realities of living in America, the more Grokhovsky has come to value joy and pleasure. She's a doer, an organizer who fell in love with New York, most of all, for the community. But when resources are scarce, any bit we can keep for ourselves is a treat. Grokhovsky pursues pleasure to reclaim ownership for her own existence. “The audience is not allowed in my studio, ever,” she said. “When I make this, there's nothing going on except me.”

Still, the viewer's visual enjoyment matters just as much as the intrinsic inspirations that drove Grokhovsky to devise and design ‘FANTASYLAND.’ Her predominant focus throughout the process lies in pushing and playing with the imagination. “When I make work I'm always making myself laugh, because so many absurd things happen,” she said.





Katya Grokhovsky, Bad Woman, 2017, video still. Courtesy of Smack Mellon.

The exhibition is designed to quietly invite viewers through secret back paths, vantage points from which they might catch a face with false eyelashes—one of the mannequins throughout the show which Grokhovsky respectfully refers to as her ‘ladies.’ These funhouse figures come with three video installations filmed, directed, and acted by the artist, ornately-masked citizens of ‘FANTASYLAND’ fussing about in various landscapes from Grokhovsky’s rich life experience, sometimes even wearing her mother’s clothing. The woman in these videos are “tacky and kind of kitschy, which I use a lot, coming from very kitschy environments.”

As another chapter in the artist’s ambitious evolution, Grokhovsky stated that ‘FANTASYLAND’ is her largest scale undertaking yet, and probably the most expensive. She’s taking more risks with materials. Grokhovsky attributes these developments to more studio access and a stronger network. “It is a tough city,” she said of New York. “It’s logistically a nightmare. But I’ve learned a lot now by being here.”

“I just made a decision to go for it, regardless of storage issues, and give myself permission,” she intimated. “You do have to come to that conclusion, I’m just gonna play, invest time, money and labor.” ‘FANTASYLAND’ constitutes a kind of proclamation from the artist, declaring her birthright as part of that very minute 31% of all positive space in the universe.

This spring marks the first decade anniversary of Grokhovsky’s practice in the States. Now, when she’s asked what kind of artist she is, she replies ‘American.’ “I never thought I’d say that because I was international,” she told me. Once an immigrant, always an immigrant—or maybe she just likes to move, to dodge her own physicality.

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“Of course, I'm very cynical about that, too, about becoming anything. What is ‘American’ anyway?” ‘FANTASYLAND’ is her country, after all, through May 2nd at Smack Mellon. **WM**



VITTORIA BENZINE

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