

Little Girl is not Afraid of the Dark

Those confronting Bita Fayyazi's work for the first time will not take long to discover the autobiographical hinterland to her art. These spectacles in bronze unfold individually and collectively through composite, polymorphic characters (like Woman/Little Girl, Man/Giant, Imp/Cat) appearing and re-appearing across the autobiographical narrative landscape. The inhabitants of this private and personal world, are part real, part mythical, experienced and imagined. The Woman/Little Girl, clearly self-referential, mischievously appears in most of the works in different guises: sometimes on top sometimes below, playful, abused, defiant, compromised, flirtatious, ridiculing, as a violated vamp, passive and vulnerable yet flirtatious and active, taunted and taunting, somewhere between vulnerability and control, desire and rage. It is the Woman/Little Girl who has come out of being "afraid of the dark"ⁱ (to borrow words by Rob Storr in relation to Louise Bourgeois, who in the artist's words, is her most powerful source of inspiration). Bita Fayyazi stares directly at her audience in these works, much in the same way that she does in her live installation. Baring herself in view of the audience she immerses the self in a polymorphous world of uncensored memories and fantasies where the mythological and domestic merge in erotic tales of desire, pleasure and excess, punishment and abuse - all materials of taboo. In a narcissistic relationship with the fetishising of the self, Fayyazi creates voyeuristic spectacles. Energised with much the same fury as those of French artist Nikki de Saint Phalle (another significant source of inspiration), the outed Woman/Little Girl appears to have "a number of scores to settle with the world of men".ⁱⁱ

Fayyazi's present exhibition explores the core themes of sexuality, femininity and power using a figurative vocabulary drawn from the human body and the domestic realm. Contrary to the solid form of the bronze, the language beckons a vocabulary of metamorphoses and indeterminacy, the figures pouring and flowing into one another accented by sexualised stiff solid forms.

In Feisty Woman the Woman tramples a man lying on his back in pain, helpless; a woman chokingly climbing into or out of his mouth; his nose in the form of a chimney; his genital a dismantled water tap inverted towards the buttocks of the raging woman. Despite the traumatic state he is in, he is still at it, never giving up.

In ??? a composite, four legged, multiple breasted creature towers over a fallen man, sporting a woman's leg in high heels, an amputated back leg, and a third buried almost knee-deep into the back of a fallen man. Little Girl rides astride the animal, witnessing, peeping, bewildered part pitying the man submitting to the crushing penetration of the exaggerated phallus in the form of a ???

??? presents an intermingled threesome between an oversized Baby Boy, Woman and a Jin.

In ??? the cloned group of 'split off' Little Girls personify the 'sin' and the internalized guilt in the forms of the Little Girl who masturbates leaning back against mattresses and the three Little Girls who threaten to throw domestic and household objects at the first, not dissimilar to those an angry mother might use to punish. The Imp lies between the mattresses, as perpetrator, protector and witness.

Creative tension across the body of work is expelled along the trajectory of what George Bataille called "the two great irreconcilables: taboo and transgression", at the colliding junction of which "eroticism attains its ultimate intensity".ⁱⁱⁱ Fayyazi's present body of works exists within the realm of this binary world and its vitality derives from the conflict between transgression and taboo. As Bataille says - referring to the inevitable connection between conflicting emotions - "The taboos are there in order to be violated... When the negative emotion has the upper hand we must obey the taboo. When a positive emotion is in the ascendant we violate it."^{iv}

The transgression of taboos - of either the universal or the culture-specific categories - is the liberating energy spun by the artist through the woven yarns of molten adventures, eliciting a dramatic ambivalence between conflicting emotions of desire and revulsion. In Bataille's words, "Man in any case beckons to both of these worlds [taboo and transgression] and between them willy nilly his life is torn."^v Drama here refers to the theatrical embellishment and the narrative nature of these tableaux vivants. Humour and magic are employed in careful avoidance of any melodramatic use of taboo materials. The domesticity of transplanted found objects, which often carry sexual and aggressive connotations, not only introjects humour, it hones in sharply on the potential violence of the domestic realm. Magic and humour are employed as deliberate devices in the subverting of the erotic and the violent, undermining the narrow, easy dramas of (either bourgeois or Irano-specific) cliché and shock. Eschewing the obvious, cliché and sensational is core and essential to the preservation of the power of authenticity in such works. Without authentic charge, depictions such as these are quickly doomed to the shallow grave of ineffectual indulgence.

There is a linear causality between Fayyazi's's work, her life, and the larger public sphere. In talking about her work, the artist candidly refers to real-life childhood experiences - of early sexual abuse by a male servant and fear of a harshly punitive mother and the inevitable associated feelings of guilt and 'loss of innocence'. Hence, Fayyazi's active pre-occupation with the notion of innocence and its indeterminate boundaries is evident in the conflicting layering between explicit candour and magical mythologizing. Once made public, a body of work like this enters into the indeterminate space where the personal, psychosexual elements connect with social and cultural ones. Inevitably, it interacts powerfully with the social context in which it lives. In the current Iranian historical narrative, where an artificially imposed, monolithic, pseudo-puritanical vision of society labels and limits elemental and fundamental free expressions as taboo, work

such as this inadvertently becomes a violent social commentary. It not only depicts the transgressive violation of the innocence of childhood but it embodies a violent reaction to that imposed narrow field of vision and all that it suppresses. Politicising and publicising entails a degree of social activism. However, further afield and away from the peculiarities and the reductivist dimensions of local discourses, Fayyazi's new body of work also resonates strongly – albeit unintentionally – with the feminist axiom whose "major contribution to the production and structure of knowledges [stems from] its necessary reliance on lived experience".^{vi}

In Fayyazi's work the experiential has no doubt gone through a process of construction, whereby truths and semi-truths are interwoven into projected characters, memories, flashbacks and fantasies to create these magically shifting fairytale images. And not unlike the fairytales of the artist's own childhood monsters, giants, witches, magicians, lords, princesses, battles, love, death and loss are always portrayed with vivid candour, uncluttered with reason and the sensibilities of grace and taste. As was said about Nikki de Saint Phalle, it is as though the creative energy is not pre-occupied by and "does not care about aesthetic lines, elegance, harmony, genteel reserve, but which instead shamelessly makes ironic use of our good taste and social taboos".^{vii}

It is not surprising that the present body of works resonates vividly with those artists who have made it their business to explore the female psyche, including Louise Bourgeois and Nikki de Saint Phalle. It is curiously apt that with her arrival into the emancipatory and explicit realm of female sexuality Fayyazi gets her new body of work first exhibited in Paris.

Confronted by her own 'revelations of the self', perhaps the maverick magician, Fayyazi, doesn't feel dissimilar to Nikki de Saint Phalle who said about her own series of the Devouring Mothers: "[They] are extremely ironic and represent quite a severe criticism of society. These works are unpopular because they remind people about their nightmares of being devoured by the evil witch. Although these sculptures sometimes frighten even me, they are among the ones I like the best"^{viii}.

And who in 1961 painted the phrase:

"I shot against
Daddy
All Men
small men
Tall Men
Big Men
Fat Men
My Brother
Society

the church
the convent school
my family
my mother
ALL MEN
DADDY
Myself
MEN.....

I shot because it was fun and made me feel great.”

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ⁱ Storr, R., *Abstraction – L’Esprit Geometrique*, in Louise Bourgeois, Tate, (London, 2007), p. 22.

ⁱⁱ Restany, P., *Niki de Saint Phalle, My Art – My Dreams*, Carla Schultz-Hoffmann (Editor), (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2003), p. 6.

ⁱⁱⁱ Bataille, G., *Eroticism*, Translated by M. Dalwood, (London & New York: Marion Boyars, 1962 [1957]), p. 64.

^{iv} Bataille, G. *Eroticism*, Translated by M. Dalwood, (London & New York: Marion Boyars, 1962 [1957]), p. 64

^v Bataille, G., *Eroticism*, Translated by M. Dalwood, (London & New York: Marion Boyars, 1962 [1957]), p. 40

^{vi} Grosz, E., cited in *Trauma and Visuality in Modernity*, Lisa Saltzman and Eric Rosenberg (Editors), (New England: University Press, 2006), p. 143.

^{vii} Restany, P., *Niki de Saint Phalle, My Art – My Dreams*, Carla Schultz-Hoffmann (Editor), (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2003), p. 7.

^{viii} De Saint Phalle, N., *Niki de Saint Phalle, My Art – My Dreams*, Carla Schultz-Hoffmann (Editor), (Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2003), p. 29.