

FIGURE

A person is shown from the chest up, wearing a vibrant, multi-colored knitted hat with patterns of red, green, blue, yellow, and black. They are also wearing a white, possibly silk, garment. The person is positioned in front of a large, white, serif font that spells out the word 'FIGURE' against a black background. The text is partially obscured by the person's head and shoulders.

conversation with **ANNA PERACH**
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Seven Wives, Performance, Movement Director: Luigi Ambrosio,
Performers: Michaela Cisariková, Anna Guzak, Rachel Cheung,
Sound Producer: Jamie Hamilton, 2020. Photographer: Matt Ashford
Studio. Commissioned by Procreate Project with the support
of the Arts Council England.

SANDY DI YU *in conversation with*
ANNA PERACH

SDY

Could you briefly describe your practice?

AP

I think the easiest way to describe it would be to start off with technique. In the past three years or so, I've been working with a technique called tufting, which is a way of making carpets. With this, I make three-dimensional sculptures which can be performed in. I start off by making an image or sketch of the sculpture I want to create, a wearable sculpture. I create the pattern such as you would do with clothing, and then I tuft every part of it. I create my own designs into it using different tufting guns. I have an electric gun and a completely manual one, and I can work with different heights and different textures. For example, for one of my works in progress, I would have four separately tufted parts. Then, I would sew everything together and put the lining in it,



Pretty Lady (Kim) and Alkonost, London, United Kingdom, 2020.



The ritual of the domestic, Performance,
Roman Road Gallery, London, United Kingdom, 2018.

and if it's going to be an installation I would plan out the installation, or perhaps it would be planned out before. If it is a performance, I would start working with the performers, or perhaps a bit earlier. For performances, the rehearsal process would be the more urgent thing.

In terms of content, there are three main pillars of my work. The first is femininity, or the exploration of the different aspects of femininity. It is more about femininity as a concept or the different associations that are related to it, not so much biological femininity. Anyone who experiences themselves in relation to femininity can hopefully identify with my work in some way. The second pillar is craft, which is something I am really interested in. This includes the place that craft has in contemporary art, as well as the harmonies that arise from the combination of the place that women have in culture and the place that craft has in culture. The third is folklore. I think I tend to work with archetypes and very primal representations of the female body, mythical women, or monstrous women, taken from different folklore stories.

I started off with Slavic folklore and I have since expanded to other folklore. I reuse those stories in order to retell my own stories and take them to the now, to explore current narratives, or how those stories are still mirrored in today's societies.

SDY

How did you get into art, and how did you develop your art to what it is now?

AP

I was born in Ukraine when it was the Soviet Union. When I was seven, we moved to Israel so I grew up there. I did my BA in art at Bezalel which is the art academy in Israel. I graduated from my BFA at twenty-three, so I was relatively young. And then I kept on practising art but in



Alkonost, Performance, Mimosa House, London, United Kingdom, 2019.



Mother of Egg, Performance, L'étrangère, London, United Kingdom, 2019.



less than a professional way. I spent some time on self-exploration, of who I am as a person. I also did a diploma in art therapy and counselling, which is something I still work with. I worked as a counsellor for a bit and kept doing art on the side. I had a studio at home but it was on “small fire”, as we say in Hebrew. And then my partner and I relocated to the UK and I felt that all my anchors in life were dissolved, so I had to reconsider who I am and what to do with myself. Art felt the most natural to me, and the only anchor I could reach to was art. I started working with painting again and then I became pregnant.

When I got pregnant, everything got crazier for me, because it is like a whole identity crisis. I almost started to study counselling, as a full-on psychotherapist. I think when things really change, like during pregnancy, you feel braver in a sense, you have less to lose perhaps? So I thought, okay, it is either now or never. That is when I applied to both Slade (School of Fine Art in London) and Goldsmiths (University of London). I got into both, which was amazing because I didn't think I would get accepted anywhere. When my child was nine months, I started my MFA at Goldsmiths.

SDY

Is that why you did your Masters part-time?

AP

Yes, I did a part-time programme because of my child, just to be more available, and also because I work on the side, for financial reasons.

SDY

Did becoming a mother affect your approach to your subject matters and your practice?

AP

Yes, I think it definitely did. As I said, there is something about that state of your body transforming, and for me, it came at a time when my whole life was transforming. It was so powerful that I got really close to primal themes. Something about going through this process was a shaping



experience. In that sense, definitely, I think it pushed me deeper in terms of research and in terms of what I wanted to do with the arts. In terms of the more practical things, it put a fire under my bum. You don't have much free time as a parent, especially if you have younger children. You are always rushing, you are always busy, whereas perhaps before you would have a bit more time to explore and think or be a bit depressed. Which sometimes I miss, having that space. I didn't have the space to think so much, I just had to use the time I had to actually work and actually be focused. So I think for me, it was a real driving force. I also felt very responsible once I had my kid, where there was suddenly a huge responsibility on my shoulders. If you choose to do something, it has to be justified. It wasn't like I was going to work for a bank and saying : "Oh, I'm earning money for the family". If I chose to do art, then I have to really make the best of it. Otherwise, I would just feel extremely guilty.

SDY

Tufting is something that perhaps people wouldn't associate with sculpture, in the same way that many crafts associated with domesticity aren't. Could you describe its significance to your practice and how you started using it in your work?

AP

I come from a background of sculpture and installation. That is what I did in my BA. I did a bit of painting and drawing, but it is not what I would consider my medium. It was more for the sake of enjoyment and sometimes I wouldn't enjoy it, but you know, as an artist you quite often experiment with those mediums. I considered myself more interested in sculpture and installation. Before coming to Goldsmiths, what I started doing was exploring the domestic space with the artefacts you might find in these spaces, and how they can reveal cultural heritage as well as something



Birthmark, Tufted mask, 80 × 120 cm, 2018.





about the person who lives there, their fantasies and dreams, how the domestic space is almost an extension of the self. As a part of that, I started working with materials associated with domestic space. That is how I found myself working with craft as well. I did a bit of embroidery for a while and then when I came to Goldsmiths and found out about this tufting technique, which is not very common. The second I saw the material, I really fell in love with it.

Initially, I was drawn to working with carpet as a part of researching the domestic environment because the household I grew up in had plenty of carpets. At first, I was working with ready-made carpets. That created an issue because the carpets I would buy would be cheap, so you had to think about their production and who might be abused in that production and all this gets brought into your practice. If I made my own, I felt that I would have much more control over the imagery and what I wanted to talk about. Not that production and labour aren't important, obviously, they are, but it was not the focal point for me.

I started with two-dimensional carpets, wall-based works. I was also interested in masks and masquerades and their relation to identity. I thought, how about I just try to do a mask? It started as a sort of an experiment. Before doing that, I remember being in a period of not being sure what I wanted to do. When I made the mask, I was really excited, and so I just kept doing that. And then they grew into bigger environments. Later, the performance aspect came into the work, so it expanded into another field I could research. It opened so many doors for me. The first mask I made is called *Shadow* and it is currently in Lisbon.



Why specifically “wearable”? What is the relation of your artworks to the body of the wearer?

What I was partly interested in, in my research of the domestic, was to expose the underlying tensions and anxieties you might have in the domestic environment. So I came up with the idea of this monstrous mask that would be made with this technique and with soft materials, and I liked that tension. I’m not sure if the first mask was exceptionally scary, but that was the intention. I started off with two-dimensional masks, quite big ones, and then I thought, why not a three-dimensional one? So when it became this 3D mask, it became a wearable object. That’s how the whole “wearable” aspect started.

Most of my childhood, I watched my mom getting dressed and putting makeup on, her performance of going out from the domestic space where she can be “free”, or less glamorous, to her transformation into this diva. My mum is really into her makeup and her clothing. It is almost like Ru Paul; she really puts in the effort. I think it is all layers of how you can reveal something or hide something, which is what you do with a mask but also what you do with clothing. All those elements became the wearable sculptures.

And then I started exploring performance. I rarely performed myself. So far, I performed twice. Once I performed in Goldsmiths just to understand better what I was doing and to have that experience. I performed recently in Italy because the performer freaked out and had a panic attack, so I didn’t really have a choice. But mostly, I don’t perform because I’m not physically trained. A performer doesn’t have to be a dancer, but I’m not connected to my body in the way that I would hope a performer that I work with would be. I do try the works on myself just to understand how



The ritual of the domestic, Performance, Roman Road Gallery,
London, United Kingdom, 2018.

they feel and what someone experiences in them.

Initially, when I started working with performance, I found it quite challenging because I think more in 3D, and it took me a while to adjust to thinking in movement. I saw these images in my mind but had no idea how to translate them into something performers could actually understand. Especially when you're working with young performers, they're really looking for those instructions and directions. What I often do now is discuss with them the idea of what I want the specific character to create, what is the dynamic within the performance.

Another thing that really helped me was working with a movement director. It has been an amazing collaboration with Luigi Ambrosio. With him, I'll have an idea, we would discuss the idea, and we would think about what would be appropriate to represent this idea in movement. He has his own background with movement and dance, and he can bring those associations in. And then we rehearse. I never used to rehearse when we first started off. Now, it's not so much choreographed in terms of strict sequential movement. There is quite a lot of freedom for the performer to embody the character, but there are guidelines, and there is an understanding of what that character, or them as that character should achieve. An in-between performer and character.

SDY

In another interview, you were talking about reactions to some of your works, and you described some kids who freaked out, which is both fantastic and funny. Could you tell us more about this?

AP

This was a performance at a shopping centre that had a gallery space in it. It was Whyteleafe Shopping Centre, which was the first shopping centre in London, but it no longer exists. We were there in its final days before it was due to be demoli-

shed. In that performance, the characters were walking around in the space. It was earlier days for me in terms of performance. Visitors could experience wearing the garments as well. This was part of the idea of the show. It was called “Play”, and there was an interactive aspect to it. A lot of people came with their kids to the show, and it was interesting to see how the younger children experienced it. There was something really natural about their reactions. They were kind of scared in the beginning, and then they felt more comfortable after a while, to touch and get close. And then there was this sort of violence, this craziness where they were running around with it.

SDY

Very *Lord of the Flies*.

AP

Yes! It is definitely that. There was some sort of a release, where it felt like they were without boundaries. We had to stop them at some point because they were just going off. It’s dangerous for the work and for them, potentially. I like that the work brings this sort of energy.

SDY

There’s an aspect of feminist reclamation in your works. Specifically in *Seven Wives*, a project commissioned by Procreate Project, by giving Bluebeard’s wives back their bodies they are able to perform their anguish, turning a cautionary tale for hysterical women into a stage. But the women are still caught on the rope, reclamation without emancipation. Could you speak about reclamation in relation to this work?

AP

I think if there were emancipation, that would be an easy solution. I think there is a lot of violence within that sort of hanging and a lot of anguish. The S hooks that they’re hung with are reminiscent of hanging meat. That’s what the hooks are made for. To acquire them, I visited all these butchers. I don’t eat meat, so it was quite funny for me as a vegetarian, going in there, not interested



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Seven Wives, Performance installation, 2020. Photographer: Matt Ashford Studio.
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in buying any of the meat products, asking them about the S hooks and where I could buy those and where they get them from.

SDY

AP

The kind of question that a serial killer might ask.

Yes, it was quite strange because I don't look particularly intimidating or like a serial killer, especially to the typically large men who work at the butcher shops I visited. So I first tried out these smaller ones, but the ones I ended up using are bigger.

But back to the question about emancipation, I don't think there is a release. I think there is more emphasis on the disconnect and the violence of that disconnect. Going a bit further, taking that story but to an experience that I know a lot of women have, myself included, it's how you learn different ways to disconnect yourself from your body. So there's your mind or your head as the place that holds the mind, and your body as an object, and how there are almost two different experiences.

This piece is really influenced by ideas of hysteria as well and how Freud defined hysteria in the early stage. It is a condition where the body is communicating in one way what the mind or the mouth cannot communicate, what can't be verbally processed. One cannot hold this tension so the body sort of just goes off. What Freud found out was that through talking therapy, once the prison that the mind experiences is released, the symptoms of the body stops.

SDY

In this performance, there are three figures that have their bodies back, but their bodies are barely distinguishable, wearing the same dress. What's the significance of this?

AP

I was thinking about how, throughout history, the female body is on the side of the uncontrollable. There are all these fears, really ancient

fears about female genitals, castration fears, or menstruation, the whole body... there is an immense sexuality that needs to be caged and placed into the domestic space. So all those things are sort of carried with the body. My reading of the story, of Bluebeard cutting off the heads of his wives, was more cutting off the bodies. It becomes a gesture of cutting off all that is uncontrollable, leaving just the mind, which is more associated with rational thinking, less related to nature, less related to cycles and all the unknown and the transformative. For me, that gesture of putting the body back to the head was coming from that thought. You were speaking about how the characters are not fully released, fully free. For me, the emancipation comes only when the body is given back to the head. You bring what was cut off, as a woman, to the body.

In terms of the dresses, they were sewn as traditional Slavic sarafans, which is a type of dress that peasants wear. They also look like nightgowns.

SDY

AP

They look really comfy.

Yes, I always wonder whether I should wear them now, as they are also quite pretty. But then I wonder, do I want to wear them with their associations? Maybe not... so they are just kept in storage in my cupboard. In any case, it's sort of a wink to the Slavic heritage. Additionally, there is a famous performance we evoked, with my movement director when we were working on this piece. The director, Bronislava Nijinska, was an avant-garde theatre performance director. She made this really amazing piece about a peasant woman who was married to this man, and how she experiences that almost as a rape. Some of the movements were inspired by these movements, referencing this piece. For me, it gave the piece another layer.



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Seven Wives (detail), Performance installation, 2020. Photographer: Matt Ashford Studio. Commissioned by Procreate Project with the support of the Arts Council England.

The other reference to the movements were hysterical movements. When you look at women who were diagnosed with hysteria, they had typical movements with their hands up, just a number of movements, which we incorporated into the work as well. It was the early 20th century, so it was documented in images. Interestingly enough, after that, when I looked at some images of witches from the middle ages, they have similar gestures. The drawings show similar hand movements. But it could just be me making that connection, I am not sure. Although it does make sense.

SDY

AP

What are your influences beyond the literary and mythical?

There is a contemporary philosopher who is around my age, based in London, named Federico Campagna. He wrote this book that I read for my MA thesis called *Magic and Technic*. In this book, he really describes something that I didn't know how to put to words. He talks about world-making and what I find interesting is how he describes the last however many years that were influenced by this idea of scientific thinking, even before capitalism and the industrial revolution. He calls it the world of the technic, and that this world is now getting to an end. Generally speaking, we all feel in some ways that something is not working, that there is this feeling of the end of the world. And then he talks about a new world, perhaps the world of the future, which is the world of magic, which has much more fluidity, which can be this and this, and it doesn't have to be this or this. And it is much less rational, in a sense. He talks about the previous world-making, for example about ancient mythologies. I think that's what I want to create within my practice. I want to create something that takes on this fluidity, which is very much related to the idea of the feminine body. It's what I imagine is this world, this future world where





Pafti (Belt buckles), Tufted yarn, artificial hair, 51 × 68 cm, 2018.

the perception is much more fluid and much more inspired by all those things that are connected to the body. In reference to *Seven Wives*, it's all those things that are cut off for the sake of rationality.

Going back to this new “magical world”, if we are to go with this metaphor, I think it is against how we experience technology now, and I think that is why I enjoy the craft aspect of art so much: it's a world where you can experience things physically. It's a world that is much more based on experience than the mind, or the rational experience. And that's what I look for when I view art.

SDY

AP

How do you decide on the design of your work?

I create sketches. I didn't use to do a lot of sketching, but when you work with people you have to explain to them what you want. I started off with Slavic folklore because I was really mindful of cultural appropriation, not wanting to use somebody's heritage or cultural imagery without understanding really what I am doing. But the more I researched, and the more I saw these archetypes... going back to psychoanalysis, you have Jung who speaks about recurring images and themes that occur across all cultures, all folklores. With this, I felt a little more secure about using different imagery and taking inspiration from that. Then I create the sketch of a character I imagine in my mind. I work with watercolours often. Interesting enough, people respond really well to them as independent work. I really enjoy doing them, but I was a bit surprised that they hold value for others. When I actually do the work, I try not to overthink it. I am constantly overthinking things, so when I do this, I try to just play around with it and trust that those things are processed enough and that I've been doing this long enough to make sense. I try not to be too regimented.

SDY

What do you have planned for the upcoming year for your art?

AP

I have the solo show at the Herzliya Museum of Contemporary Art in Israel and another solo show at ADA Project in Rome. I also have a two-person show in London with Anousha Payne, who is an amazing artist. There are lots of things in the works.



Seven Wives, Performance installation, 2020. Photographer: Matt Ashford Studio.
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Anna Perach, Figure Figure 2021
Courtesy of the artist

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