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Katya Grokhovsky: *System Failure*
On view at the Martin Art Gallery
at Muhlenberg College in Allentown PA
February 14 through April 10, 2018
Martin Art Gallery press 2018

Spring 2018 Artist in Residence: Katya Grokhovsky

As Martin Art Gallery's first artist in residence, Katya Grokhovsky has challenged and engaged students, faculty, and the wider community, leaving an enduring mark through ephemeral work. Weaving lateral threads through her many projects, she integrates objects, sculptures, and other materials from previous installations into new works, thereby rearranging concepts and revising ideas. This iterative way of working asks us to see this installation not as a polished final project, but in a state that is a snapshot of her current thinking. Grokhovsky's ambitious and inclusive spirit also transcends the confines of the gallery to include two public performances involving a dozen students, as both participants and collaborators.

Intuitive decisions are a hallmark of Katya's creative practice. Her spontaneity and improvisation result in work that is playful and fresh, yet withstands critical scrutiny. Resistant to being branded a performer, painter, or sculptor, she is all of these things at once. Transcending boundaries, her installations are the aftermath of an unseen, unknowable performance of creativity.

Shades of the artist's autobiography and experiences -- a feminist artist who escaped a failed communist state -- bleed into her art and lead to disturbing implications. Paint poured over consumer goods (toys, dolls, mannequins) might hint at the disillusionment with the failed promise of a market economy, or perhaps the overwhelming unspoken obligations of capitalism heaped upon women, in particular. However, a playful curiosity also emerges in her many combinations, such as a plaster cat mask looking past a stack of human-sized plush teddy bears, a pinup girl draped over a mannequin's knee (observed by a boy with a yellow, paint-covered noodle for a body), suggesting the presence of uncorrupted elements remaining within the system she critiques. Frenetically arranged, and then bound together, *System Failure* reveals what happens when fetish culture is pitted against impossible expectations for femininity.

Paul M. Nicholson is the Director of Martin Art Gallery



A "System Failure"

Katya Grokhovsky's *System Failure* interrogates an outmoded, patriarchal capitalist regime and the destruction left in its wake. Grokhovsky's assembled realm of disparate materials and sign systems moves fluidly between kitsch and the grotesque, questioning notions of dominance and oppression, the gendered nature of labor, male-centered ideals of beauty, and the systematic control and manipulation of female sexuality. The wreckage of capitalism is illustrated and amplified through her vibrant materials which unite painting and sculpture, pulsating video, hybrid and fantastical creatures, and bodily distortion. Immersion and participatory experiences center and amplify the fraught experiences of women in the contemporary world, while offering conceptual and perceptual tools to upend gender-based domination.

Working in the "soupy dustbin" of 21st century "Post-Everything" global culture,¹ Grokhovsky is a unique manifestation of avant-garde principles that remain unchanged since the days of Dada: using the arts to impact society, challenging the status-quo, engaging the intellect, and rescuing the audience of art from the role of passive voyeur. A childhood in Soviet Ukraine followed by a move to Australia exposed her to wildly disparate worlds, imbalances of power and the social consequences of economic systems. Grokhovsky is acutely sensitive to the ubiquity of socially-constructed, male-prescribed female roles. Like Robert Rauschenberg's *combines* from the mid-twentieth century, her work juxtaposes various found materials and objects, exposing the inherent absurdity in everyday binaries, in particular societal constructs of femininity and masculinity. As a tangible construct, assemblage is a way to *externalize the internalized*.

Grokhovsky's indictment of status-quo gender roles is shared by women such as the Italian novelist Elena Ferrante, whose frustration with the residue of the patriarchy is thus expressed:

Everything has been codified in terms of male needs, even our underwear, sexual practices, and maternity (...) Even today, after a century of feminism, we can't fully be ourselves, don't belong to ourselves. Our defects, our cruelties, our crimes, our virtues, our pleasure, our very language are obediently inscribed in the hierarchies of the male, are punished or praised according to codes that don't really belong to us, and therefore, wear us out.²

¹ Ossian Ward, *Ways of Looking: How to Experience Contemporary Art* (London: Laurence King, 2014), 10-11. Ward refers to the formal and ideological principles of the historical avant-garde (broadly known as Modernism), the post-1960 neo avant-garde, and Postmodernism.

² Elena Ferrante, "Even Today, After a Century of Feminism, We Can't Fully Be Ourselves," *The Guardian*, www.theguardian.com, published and accessed March 17, 2018.

To interrupt dominant patriarchal narratives, Grokhovsky focuses on the bodies of the oppressed.

In the center of the installation, an over-sized, translucent, multi-colored beach ball dominates three enormous red and white teddy bears lying prostrate and askew on a wooden platform upon a pool of red paint. The bears might evoke Capitalism's bloated excesses, or perhaps they are victims of gender-based violence, limp and lifeless, dominated by an enormous...ball. The lightness and playfulness engendered by the objects' candy colors, as well as the inclusion of an inflatable unicorn and donut designed for beach recreation, deepen the experience of dramatic irony. Domesticity is suggested through a cleaning bucket and rug, a splash of the literal in a banner with the word *coffee*, and a crumpled rug, all resting upon wood stained by pools of colored paint.

These objects share the central platform with a large, disorderly pile of material beneath the central beach ball – the flotsam and debris of a damaged world. A mannequin's head is concealed by a pink hand-sculpted paper mask, a purple unstuffed teddy bear skin rests upon one of four vertical wooden supports, a hybrid body whose torso resembles a collapsed tube is tethered to a grill, a small creature with an animal mask looks up inquisitively, and a bikini-clad female doll in a pill box hat rests on a pink plush bear whose hanging head is bracketed by the truncated legs of a mannequin. Poured and dripped paint, somewhat reminiscent of the hyper-masculine effusions of Abstract Expressionism, stains and coats each item, suggesting a fluid affront to the feminine bodies.





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Grokhovsky's video and performance as well as two additional assembled specimens on the periphery of the installation deepen her deconstruction. Assembled figures combine poured paint with mixed-media: one is a mannequin with cartoon gloves, a tiara and cardboard, and the other a purple plush creature wrapped in tendrils of painted fabric, topped with a ukulele, each echoing the concentrated chaos of the central assemblage. They are twisted, incoherent, partially concealed -- defying easy categorization or explanations. In her three videos, Grokhovsky plays the role of an Easter Bunny on a tire swing, a woman outdoors next to shimmering laundry line wearing a mask, animal print coat, and stockings, and a masked, gloved figure resting on a colorful pile of household debris. Her performances evoke absurdity and prescribed feminine roles, while the grotesque mask resists her entrapment within them. A performance of "...Baby One More Time," performed a cappella by a group of young women, evokes the spectacle and tragedy of its singer, Britney Spears, a young woman used by the profit-driven, commodification machine that packaged and exploited her youth and sexuality.

System Failure creates a surrealist, dream-like world populated with the debris of systemic oppression, unbridled greed, and long-term overconsumption. The often invisible, absurd, grotesque, and violent elements of contemporary female experience are revealed and amplified against a backdrop of post-industrial wreckage. Colorful and often playful, *System Failure* is far from nihilistic in its message; instead, it's a call for engagement and resistance, promoting protest, progress, and change.

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Performance: *One more time*, March 14, 2018

Katya Grokhovskaya holds an MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, a BFA from Victorian College of the Arts, Melbourne University, Australia and a BA (Honors) in Fashion from Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, Australia. Grokhovskaya's recent exhibitions include Smack Mellon, NYC, Equity Gallery, NYC, Center for Contemporary Arts, NM, EFA Project Space, NYC, San Francisco International Arts Festival, CA, Hudson Valley Center for Contemporary Art, NY, Lesley Heller Workspace, NYC, HERE Arts Center, NYC, Amelie A. Wallace Gallery, SUNY College, NY among others. She is a recipient of numerous awards including The Museum of Arts and Design (MAD) Studios Program, The ArtSlant Prize 2017, BRICworkspace Residency, NYC, Wassaic Artist Residency, NY, Atlantic Center for the Arts, FL, Studios at MASS MoCA, MA, Santa Fe Art Institute Residency, NM, Watermill Center Residency, NY, Asylum Arts Grant, Dame Joan Sutherland Fund, Australia Council for the Arts ArtStart Grant, NYFA Mentoring Program for Immigrant Artists, Freedman Traveling Scholarship for Emerging Artists, Australia and others.



Katya Grakovsky: System Failure
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2400 Chew Street Allentown PA

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