

Kayne Griffin Corcoran

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The Passion and Pain of Aïda Ruilova's "The Pink Palace"



Aïda Ruilova's "Inside of Me," 2016, currently on view at Marlborough Chelsea. (Courtesy Marlborough Chelsea)

The first thing you notice when you enter "The Pink Palace," Aïda Ruilova's new show at Marlborough Chelsea (through March 12), is the sound. It's overbearing and enticing, loud and harsh but somehow familiar, even if it's difficult to tell at first where it's coming from. It pulls you into the depths of the gallery, where you finally come across the source of the noise, a series of deep breaths, somewhere between the sound of hyper-ventilation and ecstasy, coming from a filmed close-up of a woman's pair of lips being provocatively circled by a disembodied finger.

"I have a 4-year old and I brought him to the show the other day," Ruilova said. "He wouldn't walk in the back room because he could hear the sound and was afraid of it."

The work, digitally projected by shot on Super-16mm, is a re-photographed segment from the Walerian Borowczyk's surreal soft-core omnibus film "Immoral Tales," starring the actress Sonja Kinski (daughter of Nastassja, granddaughter of Klaus). Ruilova's film is both scary and seductive, and sets up a tension between its overwhelming scale and the reconfigured movie posters that adorn the walls of the exhibition, draped in front of black velvet and delicately sliced in precise ways to reveal contradictions in their content. "I need [the film] to feel like it was swallowing everything around

it," Ruilova said. "It had to be a scale that was exaggerated; the viewer couldn't feel comfortable." In a recent conversation at the gallery, the artist spoke with ARTINFO about the work.

The sound of your film is very loud, almost intrusive, and the image shows a large finger, cut off from any context, circling the lips. It's almost threatening.

It's abstract. For me, I really wanted this sound to be what trailed throughout the entire show, and as a viewer you would come in to the show and not know where the sound is coming from. Eventually, you would get to the image and it becomes a two-step work in that way. The sound leads you somewhere, but you're not sure what the sound is or what it's attached to at first. I guess that's the same relationship to the finger [in the film] — what is this isolated part of the body, tracing this woman's lips? It becomes disembodied, and leaves this visual impression because it's this isolated moment, with no scenario before or after. As a viewer you leave the gallery and that image stays in your head, whether it's moving or not. I think that, to me, is why I gravitated so much to this same image in my other flat works, in my previous show. It operates in two ways: it's just as powerful still as it is moving. But there is a tension that is innately there because you don't know what's happening. It's recognizable — it's a woman's mouth — but there's this eroticism there and you're not sure exactly why. That's what I was hoping for.

When I first saw the show, I heard the sound and thought it was coming from "Rocky," the inflatable sculpture in the other room.

That's funny because my first idea was that the film would be the soundtrack to the entire show. I knew the film was going to be in the back [of the gallery], and loved the idea of somebody coming into the space and not understanding what they were hearing or where it's coming from. They had to be led to the image. The sound was abstract enough that they wouldn't understand what they were moving towards. With the inflatable, when I had it installed I knew there would be a fan in it, and I thought, ok, this is really interesting, because it will play with this idea of the air, and the body, and rhythm, and time.

The sculpture also feels like it's moving, or might start at any second.

When I was initially thinking about the installation, I was thinking of this idea of the pressure and the air [the sculpture] is filled with, and how it has to fit into the corner [of the room]. Which looks sort of like a body is against another body, or your skin is against a wall — it has to fold and move according to what's around it. If you look at it from the side, you can see it pushing against the wall. That was really important. It's not just this isolated thing, it's trying to find the space and it has to shift according to what it's against. I also like that it changes the room. You have to walk around it.

It also has an ambiguous form.

Right. There are also so many body parts that it resembles, even though it's essentially a pair of conjoined boxing gloves that form to be a heart.

It changes the whole way you look at the rest of the work in the space, because there is this intrusive object in the way.

It's also at an angle, so when you come into the room you're not getting the full thing. It's like the lips [in the film] — you get a portion of it with the sound, but you don't get the image until you enter the back room. With the sculpture, you don't get the full thing until you shift around it in the space.

So scale seems like something you're clearly thinking about. The posters are a more traditional size, but the sculpture and the film are both very large. They almost overwhelm you in the space.

They are extremes. That was something, especially with the film, that I thought about a lot. Initially, I thought I either wanted it really small in the space or really large. It wasn't until I got through making some of the velvet works that I realized, because of the scale of those, that the film couldn't be a scale for the viewer that felt comfortable. Then it creates those extreme differences between the velvet works on the wall and this large thing that you're trying to weigh against those other works. Then it also has this ability to overpower you as the viewer. Because if it was at a comfortable scale then it wouldn't be able to effect you that way, where there's this tension.

You can walk past it without noticing.

Also, with the inflatable, I feel like it's an abstract shape when you encounter it at first that you don't know what it is. It's kind of sensual, but it also looks like organs in the body, like your liver [laughs].

What was the initial idea for the posters?

I started, initially, cutting shapes out of paper and laying them on the posters. I realized it had a whole different quality, rather than cutting into these delicate pieces of paper. Once you started cutting into them you can't make a mistake.

These are the original posters?

Yeah. There is such a preciseness of how you have to cut into these posters. It had to be such an economical gesture, otherwise it doesn't work with the image, or it fucks up the paper completely and you're fucked. It became this challenge of finding the right shape to put with the image and what it did to the image. With "Yellow Flowers. Grave. Procession" [2015], it looks like her neck is being sliced by this flower, and I loved that because it's a delicate cut but at the same time it has a sinister underlying quality, which I felt like the content already had. It has that dual quality of being sunny and at the same time dark.

I noticed all the images focus on a very specific part of the body.

I wanted to focus on portions of the body and never give you a complete, full figure. I think there is one full figure in the show. There is a suggestive way that the body is maybe posed in the imagery. Also, for me, keeping the posters open without glass, I wanted the viewer to have a clear sense of the surface of everything and how delicate everything is. You can see all the imperfections. And when I had them framed, I wanted them as loose as they could be on top of the velvet, so they're almost draped and hanging. I wanted the quality that they were almost dangling over the black velvet. We did our best to find a middle ground, where the images were secure enough not to fall but you get a sense of the layers. For me, it's important to see this work in real life, because you can't get that quality through a photograph.

You've done projects in the past with people like Abel Ferrara, Karen Black, and Jean Rollin. And in this show, you're clearly working with the material of film from certain period. I'm curious about the interest you have in radical figures from film history.

With Jean Rollin, I had seen some still images years ago, before any of his stuff was on DVD yet. He was one of those directors where people didn't care anymore; he straddled this line between horror films, but erotic French horror, and

fantastique film. He was pretty unique in terms of what he was doing. I hadn't seen anything like his work. I was living in Florida and I reached out to him via e-mail to his son. I eventually went to visit him in Paris for the first time in 1999 or 2000, and shot a short video with him called "Tuning," which was just a portrait of us in his home. From then we started letters for years. In 2006, I went and shot a short film with him, homage to his body of work, called "Life Like." We shot it in iconic locations where he shot his films, over and over again. I originally wanted to be in the film, but I couldn't do everything [laughs], because I was shooting it myself, so I cast a girl who resembled a lot of the women in his films. I would have never imagined where that all went when I first contacted him. I was at one point going to be in one of his films, there was this relationship between us. That was the starting point for me. When I think about the film I made later with Abel [Ferrara], or the film I made with Karen Black and Ray [Pettibone] ... I would have never known this when I reached out to Jean, but that was the inception for me working with people who I felt were important to my own body of work and what I was looking to make. There was this inference that happened by casting them or putting them into my work.

What about Karen Black?

Karen was already such an icon by the time she worked with me, her identity was sealed in terms of what she represented and the kind of characters she played. She was important to me, and we became close until she passed. With Abel, he was somebody I wanted to work with for a while. I've always been a fan of his film. To me, he was so important, because I moved to New York from Florida when I was 20, and I've been here for 20 years now. This is my home, and I felt a connection to Abel and his body of work, and how so much of it was based around geography and who he is and where he's from. Getting to know him for a couple of years before we actually shot the film, that was really important for me. Initially I had ideas that, once I got to know him better, it made more sense what I was after and what I wanted to do with him. By focusing on Abel, talking about Pasolini's death, it was a way of entering Abel's work and who he is, a dual portrait.

Are you thinking about moving deeper into narrative filmmaking? Maybe even outside the context of the gallery space?

I've actually been working on a film for the last year, my first feature. I got the rights to three books I'm adapting, which is my first foray into doing an actual feature-length film that will be made not just in the context of the art gallery?

Are you thinking of it differently in terms of how it's produced than your previous work?

It actually has a real connection. I'm real lucky to have found something that makes so much sense with all the work I've already made. There's a relationship but I also, at the same time, adapt and make an actual film out of it. My father passed away and I made the film in this exhibit, I shot it in 2014, and then the January after I found this material. I knew immediately that I wanted to do a feature with it. So I've been writing for a year and I'm getting close to being in production soon.