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“Tirtzah Bassel, *Little Deaths*”
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For her first exhibition at the RX&Slag gallery in Paris, Tirtzah Bassel adds a new chapter to a project started 3 years ago, «Canon in Drag», the first part of which was presented in 2022 in New York at the Slag&RX gallery. Those works revolve around the deconstruction of social patterns frozen by patriarchy, based on a Mesopotamian myth, that of Inanna/ Ishtar, a powerful and independent goddess of love and war. From this story, transmitted by the first known poet of history, Tirtzah Bassel overturns the codes and revisits the history of art. New images to «reboot» minds.

The title surprises, but Tirtzah Bassel explains and immediately sets the tone of the exhibition: «Little Deaths" refers to an euphemism for the orgasm» The female orgasm to be precise, the artist's aim being to tackle images and models forged by patriarchy. For this, she designs new symbols and rethinks the issue of gender, sexuality and social models. «When a woman knows the source of her pleasure, she moves in the world in a fundamentally different way» she shares. So, she created a new canon that would be a new reference, the «Canon in Drag», which she initiated three years ago and which she has built by attacking the largest broadcaster of images and stereotypes of all time: art history. She questions what we project there by going back to prehistory, by integrating Laussel's Venus into *Venus Girl with Adult Toy – After Vermeer*. Looking back and mirroring ancient and contemporary societies is a way of realizing that early human times were ahead of us and that the very idea of progress definitely does not really exist!

Inanna, a guardian figure

This is what the myth of Inanna tells in some ways, whose story was written by the first known poet, Enheduanna. We are in the third millennium BC – the pyramids of Egypt already dominate the Giza Plateau – in this Mesopotamia that has provided many founding stories that will be taken up in the Old Testament, such as the Flood or Moses saved from the waters. Inanna, who will be called Ishtar among the Babylonians, is a powerful woman of the caliber of Lilith, the first wife of Adam whom God failed to tame and whom the Hebrew accounts presented under the aspect of a demon with masculine attributes.

The models of strong women existed before patriarchy and have been erased from memory, so it is fair to give them back their full dimension by placing them at the heart of reflection and feminist fight to debunk a sclerotic system. Overthrow the world? As the carnival allows for a timeless moment, with a reversal of genders, freedom from transgression, sexual license? No, it is rather a question of returning to the sources of the first civilizations, where the stories were already written.

New archetypes to think differently

Tirtzah unravels the thread of a new story and imagines new archetypes: Rodin's thinker is bottle-feeding a baby, Venus on her rock is in full orgasm, Matisse's Dance is played by

hermaphrodites, Inanna orgasm under the dexterity of her lover practicing a cunnilingus, the girl of Vermeer holds a sex toy and not a letter, the Virgin and Saint Anne are two men, the angel of the Annunciation comes to bring the message to a mortal... “The message is clear: you will have a son and become the father of the Messiah. The reception of the spiritual message manifests itself physically in the body. The climax of his masculinity lies in his imminent role as father.”

After a brief moment necessary to readjust or superimpose on these masterpieces that we all have in mind, we are ready to perceive a new world emerging...

“In our society, motherhood tends to reinforce femininity, considered a positive quality. On the other hand, masculinity is not perceived in the same way. We are used to images of sexualized or eroticized mothers caring for babies (as in Rubens' *The Birth of the Milky Way*, which I have reimagined here), but when we see an eroticized man doing the same thing, it's disturbing and unfamiliar. As a painter, I am interested in these images.”

Interview with Tirtzah Bassel

How would you present your work to a French audience that discovers you?

I'm thrilled to share these works with a French audience. Many images in the show engage in direct conversation with specific artworks located in Paris, which will be familiar to Parisians. These include *The Provider* after *The Thinker* by Rodin and the ancient Akkadian stele “Victory of Naram-Sin” which finds echoes in the two *Fragments of Orgasm Stele of Inanna*. For viewers new to my work, it's important to position it within the larger project I've been dedicated to for nearly three years, “Canon in Drag”. It envisions a fictional Western art canon that developed outside the patriarchal framework, and features a series of paintings adopting the styles of iconic works, reinterpreted through gender reversal and altered narratives. These reinterpretations are presented in the voices of fictional art historians and form the core of a museum-style exhibition. The project is complemented by a catalog designed in the fashion of an art history survey book.

Could you talk about the title of the exhibition and explain it to us?

“Little Deaths” alludes to the euphemism for orgasm. While working on the show, I found myself asking: what are the conditions of pleasure? I mean this in terms of psychology, emotions, physical sensations, as well as societal and cultural contexts. I gravitated toward the ancient Sumerian goddess Inanna, who emerged as a central mythological figure inspiring this body of work. I delved into her poetry, and it's fascinating to note that the oldest written poem in the world comprises a series of devotional poems by the Sumerian high priestess Enheduana dedicated to the goddess Inanna over 4,000 years ago. One of my personal favorites is a poem describing a sacred ritual, an annual reenactment of the love between the goddess Inanna and her lover Dumuzi, performed by the high priestess representing Inanna and the king embodying Dumuzi.

The details of this ceremony are beautiful: it commences with the rhythmic beat of holy drums, male prostitutes meticulously grooming themselves in anticipation, cross-dressed dancers forming captivating processions, and abundance of food on overflowing platters, and the sweet aroma of incense permeating the air. And the culminating moment of the ritual: “The king goes with lifted heads to the holy loins”. This story underscores the profound notion that a woman's orgasm can hold the key to the well-being of her people. It serves as the foundational concept for these paintings, which is why I've titled the collection “Little Deaths”. In other myths, Inanna embarks on journeys to the underworld and eventually

returns, symbolizing the full cycle of life and death. Sex and death, two fundamental themes in art, are both encapsulated in the title "Little Deaths".

Inanna is a goddess who as marked you and whom you have portrayed in the painting *Sacred Orgasm of Inanna (after Titian)*. Could you elaborate on that ?

When I was a teenager, I found a dusty copy of a book titled "Goddesses and Heroines" in the basement of a used bookstore. The first story was an ancient Sumerian myth, the "Descent of Inanna to the Underworld." I was transfixed. Here was a powerful female character who fearlessly takes on life's biggest challenges and opportunities. She was bold, creative, and did not have to relinquish her power when she found love.

Inanna was so different from the female characters in the stories I had grown up with. Those characters were strong and courageous, but their arenas were limited to the home, the private, and behind the scenes. I wanted to be out in the world, so I looked to male role models in myth and real life. They offered valuable guidance, but I had to change or ignore parts of myself to fit their mold.

But Inanna was different.

As I delved deeper into her tales, it dawned on me that not only did she precede the stories from the Hebrew Bible that had shaped my upbringing in a religious Jewish family, but those narratives seemed to have been constructed in response to hers. They had deliberately flipped many elements of her stories. This realization prompted me to ponder how we arrived at our current state with such a toxic version of patriarchy. I began tracing the origins of this shift back to the end of Inanna's reign and the formation of the Hebrew Bible.

So, this body of work is, once again, about broadening our perspective. It's about envisioning what our grand narratives might look like if we rewind the clock, if we trace the contours of the powerful female deities who reigned before they were reversed or confined to narrow roles. This is why Inanna's story holds such a deeply personal place in my heart and feels so urgent. I want both my son and my daughter to grow up in a world where these characters exist as prominently in our imagination as those in our conventional origin tales.

Are you creating a new symbolism?

In some ways, I'm forging a new symbolism, while in other ways, I'm resurrecting a very ancient one. Mythologies and cosmogonies that account for feminine biological experiences exist in numerous cultures and can be traced through the historical art forms of cultures worldwide. I don't need to invent Inanna or the ancient Sumerian myths; they already exist, projecting an image of a proud, powerful, fully mature female who effortlessly wields her influence in both private and public spheres. She's a formidable female character who fearlessly confronts life's greatest challenges and opportunities. Most importantly, she's bold, creative, and didn't have to relinquish her power when she found love.

While I'm not inventing Inanna or ancient Sumerian myths - archaeologists uncovered these poems over a century and a half ago - these powerful stories still haven't permeated the public consciousness. Not many people know them, and even if they do, they might not realize how they can reshape our lives and transform our perspectives on gender, relationships, and more. So, my paintings bring these stories to life through vivid imagery. The sensuous details, the interplay of light and form, the subtle gestures and facial expressions make them tangible. We can imagine ourselves into them. They can take on lives of their own, becoming an integral part of our daily existence, ingrained in our thoughts and the roles we assume.

How is it more obvious to go through the history of art and through master paintings to get your message across around gender and women's freedom

This comes down to power and a love for beauty.

Canonical images wield immense power because they're ubiquitous, and that gives them considerable authority. When we encounter an old master painting framed in gold, hanging in a museum, we often think, "This is Art," implying it's "real" art, "valuable" art—art that we should know, appreciate, or at least respect. Even if we don't particularly like these images or know them well, we're generally familiar with them and take them seriously. The issue arises when these canonical works perpetuate problematic ideas about sex, gender, class, race, etc. It becomes difficult to challenge these ideas when they come packaged so beautifully and authoritatively. Consequently, many feminist artists historically discarded the entire package, renouncing painting and turning to other mediums.

However, this is where love of beauty enters the equation. I embarked on my journey as an artist because I fell in love with painting, particularly old master paintings. Growing up, I didn't have access to world-class museums, but in my early twenties, I traveled to Paris and visited the Louvre. I was mesmerized by these works; they were even more powerful and beautiful in person than in the reproductions I'd seen in books. I delved into the study of painting, including the techniques of the old masters, and honed my craft as an oil painter. Over time, though, I became increasingly critical of these paintings. As a woman, I realized that many aspects of my lived experience were either erased or distorted in these artworks. Unlike some other artists, I didn't want to abandon painting because of these issues. Instead, I sought to claim it for myself as a painter who is a woman. I aimed to reclaim it for all those, like me, who cherish the beauty of painting but desire to see it evolve to encompass the full spectrum of human experiences. So, I began to utilize the very forms in which I had been "raised" as an artist to tell new stories.

Can the revolution of mentalities come about through images?

We are all shaped by the stories we inherit and the narratives we construct about the world and our own lives. Many of these stories operate beneath our conscious awareness. Figurative paintings serve as one of the most potent tools for storytelling because they engage both our conscious and subconscious minds. The Catholic Church and ruling classes have long recognized this power, using it to propagate religious and class ideologies. Advertising agencies employ similar techniques today. In the age of social media, we all generate and consume images, but we often overlook the subconscious effects of compositional devices that we've unknowingly inherited from this rich visual legacy called the Western art canon.

Take you back to Prehistory (we find the relief of Laussel's *Venus Girl with Adult Toy* by the way). That's where it all started?

One of the most powerful tools of a story is its ability to establish a point of origin.

Traditional Western art history textbooks typically center a male figure as the presumed default human. When they do introduce prehistoric female figurines, they often label them as "fertility goddesses," a default interpretation that prioritizes a male perspective. Notably, the acts of giving birth and the experience of menstruation are conspicuously absent.

However, if we broaden our perspective across time and geography, we discover depictions of menstruation and childbirth in many artistic traditions spanning back through the ages.

Laussel's *Venus Girl* is a striking example. Feminist scholars, who bring a biologically female awareness to their work, have recognized the notches on the horn as symbols representing the number of moons or menstrual cycles in a year, or the duration from menstruation to ovulation. In essence, it's a prehistoric calendar that has been extrapolated from menstruation. The American scholar and philosopher Judy Grahn, has extensively explored a philosophy

centered on menstruation, greatly influencing my own work.

Could you talk about your work process?

I spend a lot of time researching the mythology, history, and anthropology of the characters or cultures I depict in my work. Once a motif emerges, I set out to reimagine it in various historical styles.

Take, for instance, the image of Inanna's annual rite with her lover Dumuzi. I envisioned it materializing on the fragments of an ancient Sumerian stele, at the center of a monumental canvas painted by the Italian Renaissance artist Titian, and in an intimate, emotionally charged composition crafted by Rembrandt. Each version's stylistic choices bring forth distinct qualities of Inanna, leading to nuanced interpretations of the story. Each image reflects the prevailing cultural belief system of its respective era.

In this manner, the project mirrors one of the fundamental mechanisms of the canon—repetition. Each painting engages with and responds to another painting over time. When grouped together, they collectively weave a new cross-generational narrative.