ART CLASS, PAULINA OTYLIE SURYS – SHOTS MAGAZINE

SHOTS MAGAZINE N0.170, P.48-53

SHOTS MAGAZINE (PDF)

ART CLASS





Above: Spit or Swallow
Opposite: The Garden of Earthly Delights

Artist Paulina Otylie Surys tells *Tim Cumming* how she's trying to get a social media-addicted world to give up the idea of the image as a swipeable object. Her extraordinarily arresting work combines antique processing techniques with dreamy, dramatic and sexual subjects



"I like the mistakes, so I relied on the clogged pores of a silk screen, the irregularities, to create one-offs, not serial prints. It's about relying on unique moments rather than a production line."





Unseeing Lovers



Photography is so ubiquitous now – some two billion images are uploaded to the internet every day – it's almost invisible. Unless it has some special, usually celebrity, quality we simply don't look at photographic images with anything more than passing attention. Yet the work of Polish-born London-based artist and photographer Paulina Otylie Surys refreshes the art form by reviving aspects of its past.

Surys' work has been featured in the likes of *Vogue Italia*, *Droma*, *Another Magazine*, and the *British Journal of Photography*, and exhibited at Richard Young Gallery in London and Île Gallery in Belgium. It straddles the worlds of art and fashion and recently Surys has explored the medium of readymades – creating photographic and sculptural works using recycled materials. Her exquisite analogue images employ antique methods such as the wet-plate collodion process, which dates back to the mid-19th century, and silver gelatin prints, overlaid with thin washes of watercolour and acrylic, emphasising the skills she developed as a figurative artist in Poland.

Weird nooks and crannies

Surys' shoots are elaborate installations-cum-sets sourced from the weirder nooks and crannies of London, featuring a singular set of models, friends and fellow artists in tableaux that hint at, rather than explicitly tell, their stories.

Her most recent multimedia assemblages break the frame and the two-dimensional image. They include *Unseeing Lovers*, which combines Polaroids, *Oculus VII* and friends posing in the "uncanny valley" as robot sex workers; and *Spit or Swallow*, a reminiscence of cut-up, sculpture, lens and installation that draws on the sexual social media app Tinder.

The aim here is to arrest the breakdown in contemporary concentration: eyes – screen (one is no time at all – and to break up the flat image across a three-dimensional object, so that our gaze returns to the work, rather than following the swipe away.

Surys trained at the Academy of Fine Arts in Wrocław, Poland, where she took inspiration from pop artist Robert Rauschenberg and invited "for a solution as to how to mix media together – sculpture, video, photography and screen printing. That is my ideal."

She began producing screen prints and became inspired by the idea of the one-off, the unique accidents in the reproductive process. "I like the mistakes," she says, "so I relied on the clogged pores of a silk screen, the irregularities, to create one-offs, not serial prints. It's about relying on unique moments rather than a production line."

Unearthly delights

From screen prints she turned to photographs. "I really wanted to paint over the photos, so I printed them on a screen print-esc canvas and painted over that." She developed her own method of colour printing, too, using silver gelatine and colour toners. "Then I moved on to watercolours and oil paint. I'd add Vaseline to the negative, which can be repeatable, but with colours on top of it, making it a one-off. So I was making photography unique again."

Her first series, published in 2012, was the extraordinary *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*, inspired by one of the less forgiving portions of the Bible, and *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, based on Bosch's early Renaissance surrealism. Both series are vivid and detailed tableaux mixing paint and photographic imagery, influenced by the allegorical drive of her original inspirations. *The Horsemen...* was shot in a ruined chapel in Peckham; *The Garden...* in a church in Paddington, with seven nude models draped around the still-consecrated altar. Not a shoot for the faint of heart.

"The lady who let us in didn't expect to come back and see all this on the altar," says Surys. "It created massive disruption, and the moment she saw all these people, the foam bites, and everyone was running around in darkness."

The images were produced in a limited edition of just three. With hundreds of layers of watercolour (2

"The amount of images we see every day really affects the psychology of how we view them."



The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse

dye overlaid onto each original monochrome print, no two images are the same. "I do that intentionally, because it is part of the initial idea. The process is automatic when I start to paint. It's the same with making a set – I am creating a painting out of objects."

Delete your account

After a two-year hiatus, which involved uncoupling herself from smartphone-driven social media when she feared she was becoming just another image addict on the swipe, Surys embarked on the first of her 3D photo-object series, *The Horsemen of Palm Memory*, an explicit response to what she calls "the current obsession with 2D computer and smartphone screens".

In a world where our attention span is more like fast food than anything nutritious, Surys' handmade interventions on paper and in sculpture seek to pull you up short. "The amount of images we see every day really affects the psychology of how we view them," she says. In her own work, making unique objects from the common reproductive aspect of exposure and development means she sends the focus back to the viewer and to unique images in a unique space. Those two billion daily uploads suddenly seem a little further away. ■