



BY MITCHELL ANDERSON

Surrogate Bodies

EBECHO MUSLIMOVA

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INSIDE BURGER COLLECTION

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Installation view of **EBECHO MUSLIMOVA's** *Fatebe Specere Mural*, 2022, acrylic on wall and oil on canvas stage muslin, hanging rod, cables, 520 × 800 cm, at "Fun Feminism," Kunstmuseum Basel, 2022. Photo by Gina Folly. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Maria Bernheim, Zürich.

Since the mid-2010s Ebecho Muslimova has regularly exhibited works depicting Fatebe, a self-inspired, larger-than-life character whose feats of ridiculousness and perversity push against our natural instincts for humiliation and shame. Across drawings, paintings, and room-sized installations, Fatebe exists as a line-drawn entity, redistributing the limits of the body, decency, and the border between artistic illusion and experienced reality. But Muslimova's works are more than just comic adventures. Instead, she harnesses her creation to depict universal feelings of otherness, awe, and possibility across two dimensions and actual space.

Crisp ink drawings floating against clean white backgrounds usually depict Fatebe in the nude: distorting and reflecting her vagina and anus (rendered as a joyfully-stylized star) in warped contortions in *Fatebe Funny Mirror* (2017) or playing around with a version of herself in a funhouse game in *Fatebe Ball Toss* (2019). Her paintings take up this duplication of Muslimova's character, pointing to an amplification and repetition of type against the specific individual. As the viewer gazes at Fatebe, she often looks at herself, exploring not only the physicality of her body and genitalia but the boundaries of what they are even capable of—both abstractly and biologically.

Rather than existing, on the surface at least, as an exploration of the grotesque or a statement on female sexual liberation, the feeling that these works convey is one of wonder; Fatebe is a personification free from humiliation, figuring out the world without the need for societal norms with its restrictive mores and taboos. Muslimova finds genuine excitement in the deployment of her character in physical spaces, with the recent Kunstmuseum Basel exhibition being a case in point. An exercise in layering, one giant windowless wall of the museum was filled with Fatebe on her hands on knees peering back as her vagina gaped open; hanging in the opening, in front of the wall, was a photorealist painting of a window depicting a view of the Swiss city that could be seen if a window in that location existed. All of this seems to suggest that Muslimova's creations could be shown anywhere, while at the same time remaining grounded in the specifics of their original space. Myriad executions such as these reflect the ridiculousness of life and art as well as the ways in which Muslimova (and in many ways all of us) attempts to survive both emotionally and physically. Muslimova's works look at the basics of existence and question the why and the what, grounding them in the flesh and bones of being.

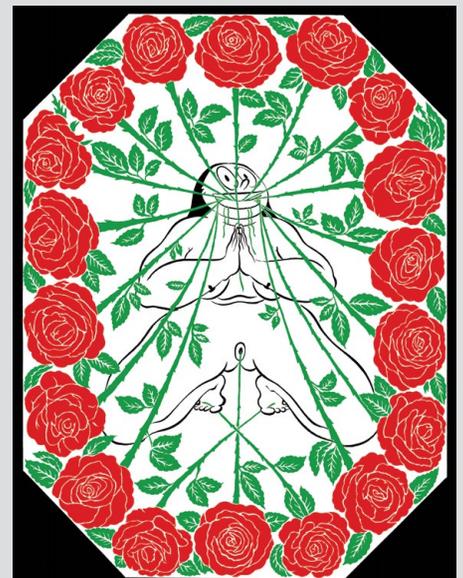
I sat down with Muslimova after her recent critically-acclaimed exhibition, "FOG" (2023), at Magenta Plains gallery in New York, where we spoke about the influence of Hieronymus Bosch, art school epiphanies, and how her notorious cartoon invention continues to challenge our fundamental ideas about the physical body.

How did you first come to draw Fatebe, the character that your body of work is built around?

I started drawing her as a release from art school pressures. I wanted to make something that was good, but not art. I thought: I'm going to make this thing, and it's never going to be shown anywhere, but I'm going to make it all my life. I'm going to make something really good, but also the dumbest, most basic thing ever. I thought that running with this bad joke of myself would be it. But the joke became real.

So, you were already doing this in art school?

During my last year at The Cooper Union in Manhattan I would draw Fatebe for friends. It would be my parlor trick. We'd be sitting around drinking, like typical art school kids, and I would pull her out. I've always had issues with body image and when I started drawing Fatebe on it was to relieve anxiety over these things that seemed too trivial to take seriously and that I never addressed. Body preoccupation seemed to belong in a category of irrelevant concerns that should be resolved or surpassed so that I could think about greater art things.



EBECHO MUSLIMOVA, *Drawing 16*, 2018, sumi ink and gouache on paper, 49.8 x 42.2 cm. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Maria Bernheim, Zürich.



While many people refer to her as such, you often say that Fatebe isn't an alter ego. How do you relate to your creation, and what do you see her as if not a direct reflection of yourself?

She's not an alter ego, she's a surrogate body. She's not a drawing of a body, she's not a portrait of someone, she's a flat line. That's why she can do all these things. And it's not gross to me. You know, I don't want to see actual bodies do any of this. The limitations of the physical body don't apply to her. She's self-sufficient. She just exists. And this is why she has a liberated character, because she needs nothing, or no one. She has no need for speech, or cover, or gravity. She's just pure freedom.

You emigrated from Russia to the United States when you were six years old and at a time when East and West meant alternative visuals as well as concepts. Do you see any connection between her and your childhood?

When I was very young my father would show us our favorite book of Hieronymus Bosch's depictions of hell and heaven. We would sit down and say: this is hell, isn't it funny? And this is heaven, isn't it just as fucked up? That was very powerful for me. Even before I came to America from Dagestan I was obsessed with Disney. I was longing to come to America to be reunited with my mother, so Disney became this aesthetic of desire because it meant "America." The line turned me on, everything about it. I think those two things, the Boschian and the Disney, are obvious influences in what I do today.





Top to bottom:
Installation view of **EBECHO MUSLIMOVA's** (from left to right) *Fatebe Phantom Cage*, *Fatebe Reverse Gallop*, *Fatebe Heirloom*, all 2020, enamel and oil paint on Dibond aluminum, 243.8 × 365.8 cm, 243.8 × 121.9 cm, and 243.8 × 121.9 cm, at "Scenes in the Sublevel," The Drawing Center, New York, 2021. Photo by Daniel Terna. Courtesy the artist and Galerie Maria Bernheim, Zürich.

Installation view of **EBECHO MUSLIMOVA's** *Fatebe Magic and Witchcraft*, *Fatebe Sunrise on Ice*, and *Fatebe Blue Shore*, all 2022, enamel and oil paint on Dibond aluminum, 243.8 × 243.8 cm, at "FOG," Magenta Plains, New York, 2023. Courtesy Magenta Plains.





How did you come to see these works as art that you would exhibit as more than a trick or a secret?

I resisted it. I always saw Fatebe as separate from contemporary art. Deep down I desperately wanted to show the work professionally and I wanted to make art. After graduating from art school I had this attitude that I couldn't fail because I wasn't making something for the art context. When I started showing her in 2015, I had years of drawings and it took me another year, after my first show at ROOM EAST in New York, to finally admit that this was my art.

Your work is no longer just drawings. There are also paintings and installations. I imagine that in the coming years Fatebe will be incorporated in ways and mediums that I can't even imagine. How did you discover how expansive your work could be?

The first time Fatebe left the small page wasn't in the paintings. It was a big mural, which was also my first institutional exhibition ("HOW THE SENSUALITY IN ME SCATTERS," 2017) at the graphics biennial in Ljubljana. I was originally going to do some drawings but the artist who invited me said I should do a big mural. With the paintings the challenge and fear that I felt was not having these drawings as the truly important work, to not have them represent Fatebe's DNA. I didn't want them to become relegated to preparatory sketches. The challenge was how to preserve her as the line, where she's not a painted version of herself and she's not a drawing on the painting. She somehow needed to be something else, but still completely herself.

EBECHO MUSLIMOVA, *THE BIG SLIP*, 2018,
enamel on Dibond aluminum, 366 × 244 cm.
Courtesy the artist and Galerie Maria
Bernheim, Zürich.

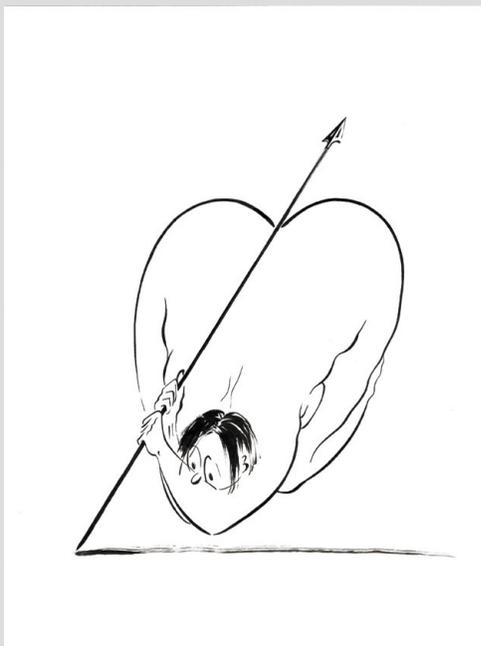
I like how you say that she was a surrogate, because I think another aspect that's important is that the works are not just drawings of some kind of funny character. Like any other great work of art they are reflections of our world, even if that world is warped and confused. Your show, "Scenes in the Sublevel," at The Drawing Center in New York in 2021 was built on panels which reflected the physical exhibition space so that echoes of the exhibition exist within the paintings themselves. And some of the works ended up entering the permanent collections of other institutions, like the MAMCO in Geneva or the ICA Miami, so The Drawing Center is now within those spaces in perpetuity as well.

I also echoed that in my recent show ("FOG") at Magenta Plains in New York, where the whole show was conceptually held together with painted cables. The idea is that the paintings are in the perfect order at the moment of their initial exhibition, and then they spill out individually into the world. Wherever the paintings then go in the world, they could always be reassembled. I want the idea that the exhibition exists after it's supposedly over.

Every exhibition I've seen of yours has had some kind of unifying conceptual bent to it, while the works always have at least one of their own that then fits into this wider community of paintings. How do you conceive an exhibition of work as opposed to a singular piece?

How did you conceive of this idea with your recent show at Magenta Plains where each work includes painted cables that, through perspective and the viewer's imagination, seem to hold the entire room together?

I live under the Manhattan Bridge in Manhattan and my studio is under the same bridge in Brooklyn. I scurry across it every day like a fucking rat. Seeing those huge cables in the fog every morning gave me this idea to depict a fog universe in a series of section cuts. The Drawing Center show ("Scenes from the Sublevel," 2021) directly mirrored the exhibition space and this one I thought everything would be kind of shifted, like finding one's way through the fog where objects become obscured. There's this Soviet animated film from 1975 called *Hedgehog in the Fog*, which is a beautiful existential journey through fog and a search for the meaning of life. I thought the cables would act as bread crumbs, anchoring all these different scenes in different times, holding themselves and the room together. It's a tangle of parallel universes and I imagined that the gallery space would become a three-dimensional viewing window in the middle of this crazy, topsy-turvy shit.



My first painting show at Magenta Plains, "2017" (2018), had me in a total shame spiral. The gallery asked me to do a press release and my response was to make this drawing of Fatebe in the exhibition space falling into a puddle of shit. It held the show together and all of a sudden there was a reason for it all to be happening. The problem for me with making art has always been the why. Why are you doing this? Who and what is it for? When I do shows, I get the floorplans and then I have to make sense of why an exhibition is happening there. Somehow, the site specificity comes into play like an anchor. The works need to relate to that moment and to the space in a unique way.

Last year you were awarded the Borlem Prize, which is given to an artist whose body of work brings attention to the struggles and issues of mental health. Part of the stipulation was that a donation would be made to a charity in your name. Which one did you choose and why?

I chose 988, the suicide and crisis hotline in the United States. My thinking was that everyone knows 911, the emergency number, but that if everyone also had this number on their minds it would be a really cool move. I love the idea of more attention for that number, that it could pop up easily when needed.

EBECHO MUSLIMOVA, FATEBE DRAWS
A LINE, 2022, sumi ink on paper,
30.5 x 22.9 cm. Courtesy the artist and
Galerie Maria Bernheim, Zürich.

Mitchell Anderson is an artist who has organized over 60 exhibitions at Plymouth Rock, the Zürich-based project space he founded in 2014. He is also a frequent contributor of essays and criticism to international arts publications and lectures at the Zürich University of the Arts.

Ebecho Muslimova is an artist based in New York. She has exhibited at Magenta Plains, New York; David Zwirner Gallery, London; Galerie Maria Bernheim, Zürich; and The Drawing Center, New York.