

Interview

Michaela Younge and Lorenzo Bruni for C + N Canepaneri

Lorenzo Bruni: Your works have impressed me for the stories that seem surreal but also acceptable. perhaps because they are part of the long tradition of subverting the roles of society to better analyze society itself. Because of these first impressions I would like to start our conversation by asking you a question about how your own creation process takes place. Do you start your work from the history you want to make? From drawing? From the act of sewing? From the strength of the colors? Or from a particular subject?

Michaela Younge: I start my works from a particular idea or even a phrase and work off of that. I generally do some preliminary sketches, and try to do a rough plan on what the background will look like. The characters although often planned before, are added in on top, creating layers of wool. I keep records of ideas in books, and on my phone and will often go back to try to reconnect with what I was first imagining.

LB: Can you tell me more about the particular material you use for your images?

MY: The material I use is merino wool, some of which I get already dyed from Stellenbosch, while other colors I dye myself. I work onto both fabric and found materials such as old tapestry cloth, subverting the original subject matter.

LB: The surface of your works is very saturated with subjects and stories and it is difficult to find only a linear story. They change with every glance. I think for example of the work where you represent a horse race where a jockey is replaced by a pig and another competitor is the centaur of Greek mythology. a competitor goes in the opposite direction and a dog alone seems to be about to win. What does this work want to be? Is this a criticism of society or an escape from society with its historical and now obsolete rules linked to the aristocracy of a century ago?

MY: In the work ‘The race was televised but it was all in black and white’ there is a reference to the tradition of old tapestries that would portray nobility and the wealthy hunting on horseback. In these tapestries, the hunting dogs are portrayed running alongside the group, ready to collect the successful shots. The dog as best friend to man, and yet not equal. In the work however, the beagle is winning, beating the people on horseback at their own game in some sense. The race has gone awry, as the dog is closely followed by a pig-man on a grey mare, and number 7 is running in the wrong direction.

LB: In these works, a spectator doesn't watch the race but us. He's at the bottom center. Who is he? What does he represent?

MY: The spectator

LB: what you say is interesting. It seems that you, more than the landscape, are interested in the game of looks that are created between the characters you give life to. is that so?

MY: In my work, the connection or disconnection between the characters plays a role. In the work ‘Asbestos aside, the villa offered everything we wanted’ the viewer is met with a sign board that reads, “Do YOU want a LUXURY beige house?”

mocking in some sense the ideal life that is advertised constantly. In the work, a couple dressed from another era stands in front of the billboard, the woman stares up at the sign, while the man looks away in the direction of a woman modelling a swimming costume for a cameraman. I sort of imagined it as a mix of sets from behind the scenes colliding together, with characters interacting that don't belong in the same space. In the right-hand side of the work, a devil sits in a horse-drawn carriage, which sits at odds with an inflatable palm tree.

LB: Do you recover this sewing to connect with a female tradition that has been relegated to the world of everyday life and the home for too long? Your use of sewing is also a subtle way to criticize art history has always been a masculine world even today when there should finally be the overcoming of gender?

MY: Historically, needlework was regarded as a woman's occupation, but I think this idea has been changing slowly for a while, with people turning back to needlework in order to tell stories. I think the subversion comes rather from elevating the materiality of textile-based works, and creating spaces for them to be seen as high art rather than just a 'woman's hobby' or a 'craft'.

LB: All your works are characterized by details between the grotesque and the splatter, but then they always transcend in the comic and in a dimension of empathy and not of rejection or fear. How important is the dimension of humor in your work? serves to defuse the scenes of reality?

MY: I am interested in the absurdity of everyday life and I think humor is important, as it allows us as a society to be able to critique ourselves, and see-through some of the performances we do to fit in. There is something quite bizarre when one stops what they are doing – let's say at a gym, and looks around and everyone is in their own bubble moving on the spot looking towards a television that's belting out bangers. In the piece, Asbestos aside, the villa offered everything we wanted', (2020), the wording on the billboard is gauche and ridiculous, offering pillars and beige walls as the middle-class dream. The words "call now", reference the Glomail advertisements that were always on tv as a kid ('If you call now you get one free Tupperware!') The middle-class dream is therefore always unattainable as you cannot have it all. In some of my work, the violence serves as part of a comedy of errors, making it in some sense more palatable.

LB: We started this conversation before the global pandemic arrived. How did you go through this period and how will it affect your way of thinking about art?

MY: While Italy was going through the first spikes of infections, South Africa had just announced a hard lockdown, which was very restrictive in the beginning, but it was to allow for the preparations of hospitals and emergency personnel. Over the months the lockdown has become less restrictive, allowing more activities and monitoring spikes and dips in the infection rates. The time at home allowed for more family time, as well as being able to work on a new body of work. We are now in level 2, which means the economy has reopened, and restaurants and bars are running. But I am happy in the way that South Africa reacted early to the pandemic as so many people live below the poverty line, and huge spikes in infections would have resulted in far more deaths. Art is a luxury and not a necessity, which a global pandemic served to show us, but it is still important as a way to tell narratives and to reflect on our new changed world.