

## ***Reflections on the Work of Nataliya Chernakova***

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The practice of Nataliya Chernakova can be seen as influenced as equally by contemporary art and society, as by classic art forms, most notably the impressionist and baroque periods, with their focus on sumptuousness matched only by their tendency towards introspection. Above all, the artist's work—whether referencing contemporary artistic trends or historical examples—deals with the thin line between inner and outer worlds and values, and the history of their representation both in painting and sculpture. Along the way the subjects of desire and nostalgia are approached as examples of the emotive longing to impossibly escape life's present conditions which underpins art as an activity. Chernakova ultimately aims to reconcile this longing with the reality we live in using a historically transcendent language that includes marble busts, painted nudes and video within its vocabulary. What follows is a reflection on her practice and the associations it evokes ahead of the opening of her solo exhibition *Skiing Home*.

In Chernakova's sculptural work, *Phoebe* (2018), the artist turns to marble and the neo-classical sculptural tradition to create a bust of an aloof almost emotionless character. The artist explains that the sculpture has a look akin to an avatar or superhero. The features of the depicted woman are completely invented with its form being based on nothing more than a skull, one of the most basic units identifiable as a human. In this way the artist has created a compound personality, an idealised image.

The effect of detachment in the bust is aided by its cold and sheer marble surface—a material considered ideal for the calculated attainment of anatomical perfection in the renaissance period. At the same time, however, marble conveys a vulnerability as marble statues are by necessity both pale and immobile. Drawing on marble's propensity to capture perfection, twinned with its ability to convey fragility, *Phoebe* conveys the contradictions of our time, wherein social media makes us individually both more powerful and weaker than ever before. As the attainment of physical

perfection has ceased to be a myth it has become instead a plausible yet impossible aspiration, leading people into a cycle of repetition. The cold yet sensual selfie pose lasts only so long before it needs to be renewed, as if we are being forced into action by social pressure and uncaring algorithms. We find ourselves acting out the cliché of detached independence, of being reliant on no one. And yet the contradiction is immediately evident as the ‘act’ of independence played in the ‘selfie’ is useless without an onlooker to verify it. This is in a sense the trick—one of aloofness performed for an audience—that an artistic or monumental statue takes, as whilst being cold and isolated it is completely dependent on being ‘looked at’ in order to come into existence for the viewing public.

The tendency for our obsession with self-image to have a paralysing effect on the individual was well documented by early psychology (particularly if we think of Freud’s interpretation of the myth of Medusa as a metaphor for the paralysing gaze of the ‘other’). Such analyses appear to have become ever more relevant with the growth of the mass media and of the means of image production. In 2002 Adam Curtis made the documentary *The Century of the Self*, which analysed the 20th century from a psychological perspective arguing that politicians and business people had deliberately fostered a society that is superficial, materialistic and overly concerned with personal appearances. Curtis argued that the 20th century, societally speaking, appeared on the surface to mark a triumph of democracy, whereby people enjoyed an ever greater freedom of personal expression exercised through consumerism and, increasingly, new communications technology such as cellular phones and the internet. The question asked throughout the series, which appears especially poignant today, is over whether that freedom came at a risk. Whether we were fact being tricked into pursuing a life of happiness gained through consumer products, at the expense of both community and of genuine inner development.

Today, in the 21st century both the inner level of self development and the outer of social development are reduced via interaction with a screen: to feel fulfilled inside we reach outside, but no further than our handheld devices (on which we upload photos, ‘like’ other user content and send messages). The work of introspection and that of laboured work taken out

for the good of the environment or the community are both reduced to empty clichéd poses and gestures: of clicking, of swiping, of liking.

Cliché and repetition are themes central to Chernakova's work, as she strives to present a familiar motif (such as the sculptural bust or the nude) in such a way that the viewer learns to see it in a new light. Talking in his interview entitled *Abécédaire* Gilles Deleuze, a philosopher famous for his work on repetition, linked the act of repeating hummed songs, household chores and daily commutes to, "the problem of territory, and of processes of entrance or exit of the territory, meaning to the problem of deterritorialization. I enter in my territory, I try, or I deterritorialize myself, meaning I leave my territory." Put otherwise, for Deleuze the act of repetition is way of both demarcating a territory or consolidating a convention, but also of going beyond it. In constantly repeating an act, image or rite, something will eventually give way to novelty. It is with this in mind that Chernakova addresses the female nude in her works, drawing on a history that extends back to the *Venus of Willendorf* (almost 30,000 BCE) and referencing influences such as Velasquez's *Rokeby Venus*, Matisse's nudes and images from Francis Picabia's 'pin-up period'.

The artist is also influenced by artists who trod the line between figuration and abstraction, such as Philip Guston, Joan Mitchell, Chaim Soutine, and Kazemir Malevic. In their works the repetition of the nude almost gives way to abstraction, demonstrating the fragility of the clichéd form. This can be seen in Chernakova's series *Pelicans* in which the form of the seabird—rendered somehow fleshy—meets the human form: globular, genital and amorphous. In these images the boundary between inner world and outer world—the intrinsic and extrinsic poles earlier described—becomes hazy as the realm between physical form and fantasy is challenged. The repetition of the nude results in a breakdown of the usual divide between the human form and the outer world, as the imagined pelican form interrupts physical space. This interruption suggests an overcoming of the superficial nature of our screen-based society and the resulting superficiality with which we approach both the inner and outer realms of existence, and the link between them.

Such works suggest an alternative to the recent tendency in painting towards ‘zombie formalism’, a term coined in an essay written in 2014 by Walter Robinson. The term describes a slick abstraction in contemporary painting with attention paid to surface values and a sumptuousness that appeals to the outer rather than inner faculties. The often sheer surfaces of ‘zombie formalist’ works mimic the gloss of the iPhone or iPad screen and body, as if everything is perfectly encapsulated within the shell of the art object, with no residue or remainder. This makes the work quite the opposite of the formalism intended by art critic Roger Fry at the turn of the last century, when he intended the purely formal considerations of the post-impressionists to imply an emotional engagement with the materials of painting such that the inner world of the artists found expression in the outer materials of nature (oil, pigment, cotton, etc) that made painting possible.

This relation between inner and outer and the inversion of artistic values so that everything is ostensibly absorbed within the contemporary art object can be seen reflected in *Her*, a sculpture carved from pink marble. Its translucent surface resembles the almost vacuum sealed quality of idealised western skin. The work represents a concentrated form of femininity featuring a vagina on one side of a sleek sphere (made in handheld dimensions) and a breast on the other. The translucence yet impenetrability of this art object evokes the availability of the nude image via screens on pc or handheld devices, and yet the impossibility of beholding a desired object that is accessed via a screen. The globalised web both brings us closer to and further away from the constantly repeated object of attraction, while the repetition leads us eventually to the futility of unrequited desire.

A quite different take on the tendency for contemporary visual culture to both heighten and thwart desire can arguably be seen in Chernakova’s sculpture, *Saturdays*, a piece that reflects on the artist’s own nostalgia for childhood. The work, made in lost wax glass technique recreates a pair of childhood skis, their fragility conveying the ethereality of memory as the artist recalls a rare moment of countryside pursuit undertaken in the city of Ekaterinburg, where she grew up. The work evokes a contemporary media and consumer trend whereby internet TV serials (such as *Stranger Things* and *The Get Down*) and video games (seen in the marketing of retro

versions of Nintendo games systems), as well as clothes lines are marketed based on their nostalgic value. This desire for a solace has become central to our culture and arguably has its roots in iconic painting and the sense of loss engendered by artistic depictions in general. Though ultimately, the solace provided by the warm buzz of nostalgia is short lived. Sooner or later the real world must be negotiated and we must confront the outer world with our inner desire to return to safer times. It is testament to the work of Chernakova that such associations emerge from her own highly personal reflections.