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Interviews

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-----INTERVIEW WITH BENITA SUCHODREV  
WOMAN IN HEAT

"My aim as an artist is to take a topic closely regarded by science and grossly neglected by mainstream culture and approach it from an aesthetic but realistic point of view by means of a medium that is accessible to all eyes that can and want to see. "

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WOMAN IN HEAT  
- Artist Statement

"A friend of mine told me years ago, when you hit forty you will see yourself age by the day. I didn't make much of it then. When I was 42 I still looked pretty, men used to turn around to take a look at me, younger men. And then suddenly...I don't like myself in pictures anymore. I had many photographs of me, I destroyed them all..."

These words were spoken by Julia, a woman I met while scouting models for this project. We never did have our photo shoot but her statement stuck with me, it struck a chord, perhaps because she was the first of all the women I interviewed and photographed to that point, who was so frank with me. And though not all of us destroy photographs with our image and perhaps many of us still make the heads of young men turn, it dawned on me that her confession was the shadow cast by the 'Julia' in all of us.

It is no secret that the socially dominant obsession with youth as a foremost token of beauty and glamour yields grim and often unseen consequences. Respectively, a female over forty is rarely portrayed in any role other than that of a mother, a wife or a 'still sexy' celebrity. Does this mean that a woman over forty ceases to be anything else but a 'social servant', or must she occupy the status of an idol to be recognized by the mainstream or even art-related media? And, moreover, where do such classifications place the single, childless and 'fameless' woman if not on the very margin of society? When a woman has breast cancer, she is the victim of a disease.

When a woman has hot flushes, she is the victim of aging. Paradoxically enough, the latter is often treated with more contempt in our society than the former. Cancer is feared, old age is abhorred. A woman might admit to having lost a breast before she would concede to having lost her menstruation, let alone her sex drive. And who can blame her? One may feel sorry for a cancer victim, but no one would imagine pitying a woman for getting old.

While aging is not a 'disease' its implications, at least in part, render it its worthy double. Eastern philosophy approaches the fact of ageing with the advent and application of remedies that may not cure the 'disease' but which at least allow room for the preservation of the 'patient's' dignity, whereas in our society aging is a disease that is swept under the rug in the plastic surgeons office or is tucked away in the psychiatrist's drawer. It is a weak seam in the fabric of life that can be accepted only if ignored, tolerated only when patched over or temporarily reinforced with the poke of a needle. It is a stigma, a scarlet letter that every woman who is or isn't a cancer survivor, must wear on her breast. And yet, the greatest burden of this disease lies invisibly on the heart. And how many women do we really know who can wear their heart on their sleeve?

The conviction that the more interesting abrasions are not of stone but of flesh is one of the guiding principles for the Woman in Heat series: a candid confrontation with the dismal and sublime phase of life where such abrasions first become apparent.

The title of the project draws on the paradox behind a notion that is as inherent to the natural world as it is degrading in the social context. The so-called 'woman in heat' is no longer a woman whose rising body temperature connotes the prosperity of life, but one whose new kind of internally generated heat signifies its definite and gradual decline. But as all destruction leads to creation, this woman enters a phase of discovery fueled by a drive for self-revelation.

Taken outside the context of the outside world into a dark and barren studio where she is bathed in the dramatic chiaroscuro light reminiscent of the paintings of Caravaggio and El Greco, the woman in heat strips off her clothes, sheds her defenses, and becomes the context itself, revealing her face and body in all their intimacy and multiplicity.

It is not in the scope of this project to challenge the gods of advertising, to march forth with the troops of feminism or show how 'sexy' a woman over forty can still be. Rather, it is to ask: how do mature women today see themselves and how do they want to be seen? If 'sexy' translates to 'sexually desirable', do women whose desire for sex decreases still want to look sexy? Do they confront this new phase peacefully or turbulently, and what could their body language reveal to the naked eye of the camera?

Treating the female form less as an object of sexuality and more as a subject of sexuality, my aim as an artist is to take a topic closely regarded by science and grossly neglected by mainstream culture and approach it from an aesthetic but realistic point of view by means of photography- a medium that is accessible to all eyes that can and want to see.

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Giovanna



Larica

How was this project realized?

After having decided to explore this subject, I began searching for my models by placing an announcement and by keeping my eyes open wherever I go. Most of the models in the project have answered to my ad and some I discovered in public spaces. After a preliminary interview, we arranged a shooting. The ladies all showed up at my studio with a suitcase full of clothes and of 'stories'. Following our photo-shoot, which lasted on average 3-4 hours, I provided all the models with a more detailed questionnaire where they could express their position in writing.



Mandie



Miriam

What do you want to express with the title of this project?

The title **WOMAN IN HEAT** is a 'serious pun'. It has a double meaning, drawing on the paradox behind an expression that is as inherent to the natural world as it is problematic or even 'degrading' in the social context. The so-called 'woman in heat' is no longer a woman whose rising body temperature signifies fertility and prosperity of life, but one whose new kind of internally generated heat ('hot-flashes') signifies its definite and gradual decline.



Mivako



Brigitte

What is your aim as an artist in doing this kind of project?

My answer to this question is twofold: I see this project as an investigation, a study of the female persona in a very particular phase of life. This study is psychological and emotional as well as visual. It is NOT my aim to challenge the gods of advertising or to march forth with the troops of feminism. It is also not my aim to show how 'sexy' a woman over forty can still be. That would be too banal and hardly a discovery. The easily digestible mass media are quick to pin words and clichéd concepts like 'sexy' or 'erotic' to images whose main concerns exceeds the plainly visible surface. I am not interested to shock or sensationalize and my work is not about 'eroticism' in the overused sense of the word. My aim is to ask: how do mature women today see themselves and how do they want to be seen? Everybody speaks about 'sex-appeal', of looking 'sexy', being 'sexy'. What does that mean, if anything at all? If 'sexy' translates to 'sexually desirable', do women who get 'older' and whose desire for sex decreases still want to look 'sexy' (according to social standards)? Do they confront this new phase peacefully or turbulently, and what could their body language reveal to the naked eye of the camera? Basically, my aim as an artist is to take a topic closely regarded by science and grossly neglected by mainstream culture and approach it from an aesthetic but realistic point of view by means of a medium that is accessible to all eyes that can and want to see.



Mandie



Svlvia

Who do you think is 'guilty' for the presentation of women as sexual objects? Advertisers use women for those purposes but what about the Art world? We have seen many artists using women as sexual objects. Do you think artists want to attract attention as the advertisers do? Would you say that sometimes Art can be as fake as Advertising?

I don't think that the question of guilt or innocence is as relevant to the so-called 'objectification' of women, as many would like to claim. Certainly, the advertisers exploit the allure of femininity, but this allure constitutes an irresistible force, so 'blaming' them would probably be the wrong departure point or conclusion. On the same token, comparing advertisers and artists may also not be the best way to approach the issue of female objectification. There will always be someone who will want to exploit or 'objectify' somebody else, regardless if this someone is a painter or marketing executive. And anything can be as real as it can be fake. Multiple factors are at play here and there is a lot of grey area. I would like to believe that art differs from advertising in that it is motivated by 'noble' goals and deeper, longer-lasting convictions.



Sonia



Svlvia

└─ The world has been influenced by the American way of living, by the cult of the body and the cult of money where appearance is everything, from a physical and social point of view. It is a fact that the cult of the body was born in California and has been exported everywhere else. Nowadays everybody is worried about their bodies as never before. Gyms are everywhere, Botox, implants... Being born in the former Soviet Union and then having immigrated to the United States at the age of fifteen how did you transition between these different cultures?  
 The transition has been difficult but I am happy to say that my attempt to remain 'immune' to these cults has been successful. I actually lived in the NYC area, where the cult of the mind is a little more prevalent than the cult of the body. The cult of money, however, is big there, too. There were times during my life in the USA where I felt invaded and even tormented by this object-oriented mentality and obsession with the surfaces of things, but I always looked past that and searched for something more. That kept me going. When I got tired of searching, I moved to Berlin ;)



Rachel



Rachel

└─ Women have been struggling for independence for decades... especially for their position in the labor world. Now the time has come to develop this independence. In your project, you have dealt with different women. Why do you think they are still worried about their Physical aspects, even if they are married, have children or a good social position; in other words- a life intact?  
 The physical aspect is always present and it always plays a role in our perception. We all have eyes, we see ourselves as we are, as we were, and as we wish to be. We also know that we are constantly being seen by others and judged by them. I think that those two views- our view of ourselves and others' view of us are two separate phenomena that are interconnected at the same time. It can be a vicious cycle. I think that a woman's worries about her physical appearance only in part relate to the way she lives, works and is perceived by the outside world. After all, when she looks in the mirror and discovers a deep wrinkle or notices that her breasts don't sit quite as high as they used to , the first thing that crosses her mind is not: "But hey, I got a job promotion!"



Petra



Giovanna

Q You have developed this project with a focus on women, but what about men? I think that men are suffering in the same way. I know that the power is still, mainly, in men's hands, but what do you think are the difference between both?

A I agree that men suffer from aging, but I don't think that they suffer in exactly the same way or that their suffering is caused by the very same things. Men, for instance, don't have to physically confront at the age of 50 the news that their biological "purpose" is about to expire. However and whatever men suffer from, I don't think that they confront their suffering in the same manner as women. In fact, I think that some men may suffer even more than women, especially when they can't or don't use the kind of outlet for their suffering as women naturally and socially can and do. Men suppress their suffering and this doesn't make their suffering easier, certainly not long term. The differences between men and women are obvious: biological and social. But there are some similarities. A man who can no longer get an erection doesn't tell himself: "well, at least at the office I'm boss!"



Claudia



Svitie

Q Any chance you'll do the same project with men over 40?

A Yes.

Q I know that everybody has to make money to survive, but being a social project, why are all the works available as limited edition fine art prints? Wouldn't it be better to have them in exhibitions to help women face reality, and make money with other kinds of projects?

A The photographs are available as limited edition fine art prints for collectors and art enthusiasts who appreciate them and want to own them. The works still can and should be on public view, in exhibitions and museums. One does not exclude the other. This body of work is made not only of light and pixels on paper but of my physical, mental and spiritual energy. So why should I make money with other kinds of projects when I can try and make money with the projects I love the most and invested the most in? An artist that can make money on what he or she loves is a happy, functioning and socially productive artist. There is probably no stranger and greater gift in this material world than getting material recognition for artistic vision; something as immaterial and pure as money can never be.



Mandie



Ilona

☞ I know you are looking for a Gallery in Barcelona to exhibit this project, hope this interview help you to get it done!

----- More Info: <http://www.benitasuchodrev.com>

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