

We Kept on Dressing, A reflection
By Arnisa Zeqo

Few weeks ago I spoke with Amalia and Dardan about their exhibition *We Kept on Dressing* taking place in an old pyjama manufactory in Athens showing Vekri's series *Girls At Home* and Zhegrova's Series of *Orgiastic Rites*. We spoke about how the two of them met during a common residency in Tirana at the old house of the leader of the post war Albanian communist party and dictator Enver Hoxha that since a few years has been transformed into a place for contemporary art. In this elegant and haunted villa in the centre of the ever changing city of Tirana the two artists connected with each other's work through their common artistic preoccupation with how intimacy and desire are woven with absence and emptiness. Like in a game of hide and seek.

Girls at Home by Vekri brings to mind the watercolours of Marie Laurencin but the pastel shades of violet, blue and pink are taken by greens and blues and a melancholic atmosphere. Solitary female bodies lie in interior settings, in poses that range from sitting down with a drink to what might feel like a slightly uncomfortable position. They seem at ease, light like a feather. The colour saturation of the water-colours and the atmosphere they imply is inspired by cinematographic realities laden by desire, occult practices and unresolved intergeneration trauma such as *Suspiria* by Dario Argento or *Requiem for a Vampire* by Jean Rollin. The scenes themselves come from online porn clips, specifically the moments before or after 'the main act' has taken place or is about to happen.

The series of *Orgiastic Rites* by Dardan Zhregova is directly referencing Dionysus, the pagan god of frenzy, wine and altered states. The drawings exist in a crossed dimension of a heroic mythical pagan attributes and contemporary gay porn aesthetics. In one drawing a violet bodied person with blonde hair stands on top of another lying body in a pose that can recall Achilles and Patroclus. On a closer look what might be an embrace is also engagement in a sexual act. In reality many of the drawings are directly sourced from contemporary casual sexual meetings with anonymous men facilitated by popular sites such as Grindr. They switch from rituals to raw empty encounters. These quick hook ups with one or multiple men exist in a space where reality and the expectations of a short porn clip are blurred. "A Hybrid between desire and reality' Dardan says.

After talking to Dardan and Amalia I go to the gym. I start going back to some physical exercise again. I row for 20 minutes to warm up and then I do five different sets for my legs and arms. 12 actions repeated three times for each important muscle. A place of non thinking, a place of rehearsal of not much really. I go back to the rowing machine, back and forth again and I start having some different images pop up in my mind.

My first visual exposure to pornographic imagery came from antiquity. More specifically from visits to the sites of Pompei where I spent some time as a young person. There were the 'forbidden spaces' the Thermea and also the more accessible Casa dei Misteri. The thermae or public baths in Pompei are not too far from the gay saunas Michel Foucault writes about. For reasons often debated by archeologists and scholars, this building includes a room with depiction of sex work, one of the earliest example of pornography, or the writing about sex workers as the etymology of the word implies. The characters alternate between nudity and clothed moments. There's a naked woman receiving cunnilingus by a dressed man, or a party of three in action. They are funny and crude and depicting quick moments of exchange. Visiting these frescos was an exiting experience, even without knowing what each vignette fully depicted at the time. The acts are immediate, there to be seen and captured quickly. They remain in my mind as blurs of forbidden excitement and curiosity.

Immersed in the red colour of the walls the images of the Casa dei Misteri work as a revelation of something one does not know but anticipates. As I raw and move my arms and legs, the images from this place recall a different experience, one of presentiment and mystery. The bodies alternate between clothed and naked. In the first scene a young naked boy (Dionysos) is reading something surrounded by three women. In another a woman is preparing for a bath, water pouring

on her right side. Another woman is breastfeeding a goat, one Brest clothed, the other naked. A character is engaged in a divinatory practice with a mirror and an a winged creature is presenting a large stoned fallus. Then there is a flagellation, a slender half clothed female body kneeled and helped by her girlfriend awaits for a whipping by a third woman, while a forth naked woman dances and plays music. The drapery between and within bodies in Pompei, like a metaphysical skin creates an entry into a different dimension. It functions like a connecting tissue, a narrative where acts and desire are playing a game of hide and seek. These elements of drapery are what binds the drawings and watercolours together in the exhibition 'We kept on Dressing'.

There is the evocation of the actual location, an old pyjama manufacturer, a place for cozy dreams. The installation created with found older fabric from the 1970s brings to life parallel dimensions of sex work and the changes on sexual imagination. It is like a skin where everything is slippery and everything surface. In the drawings of Dardan, the watercolours of Amalia, the fabric and in my own mental images different techniques of the body are laid bare to be hidden and seen. Like in rowing, and the clothing used in the gym, the music perpetrating my ear, the techniques of the body within sexual consumption are entangled on many layers of expectation, practice and imagination. How can desire and intimacy be drawn, be present alongside the changing trends of quick consumption? Could perhaps the very lack of meaning, the immediate mediation of 'scenes' be a lens for opening up how the techniques of the body relate to affect and emotion? Could this be a sort of revelation, like in a feverish dream?

Since I knew there is no romance/I just went for the body/only dick and only ass/ Dardan writes in one of his poems of the same title. There is anonymity in the encounters of the Grindr meetings, there is anonymity in the faces of girls depicted in the watercolours of Amalia. It is this anonymity that makes them familiar, homely and uncanny. Somewhere between a desired absence and a need for intimacy.

The exercises are starting to exhaust my body and I feel a rush to the head and my face is starting to sweat. There is a similar sense of anonymity in my experience of rowing and moving among strangers at the gym, being connected while fully disconnected that is not far from the previous imagery and reflections. The fabric created by Amalia and Dardan starts to reach the naked bodies in the Villa dei Mystery and seems to touch my heart beat like in a feverish dream. Already in 1964 the writer Susan Sontag in her lecture 'On Pornography' spoke about a parallel between pornographic literature and religious texts. At the gym, in thinking about the artworks of Dardan and Amalia, just like in the mysterious initiation rituals in Pompei I encounter an empty space where anonymity, absence and feverish desire meet. For Sontag pornographic art, *exites* in the same way that religious books aim to *convert*. It is a conversion of absence and a premonition of divinatory moments in the empty repetition of things.

I go down to the changing room and put up a new pair of clothes.