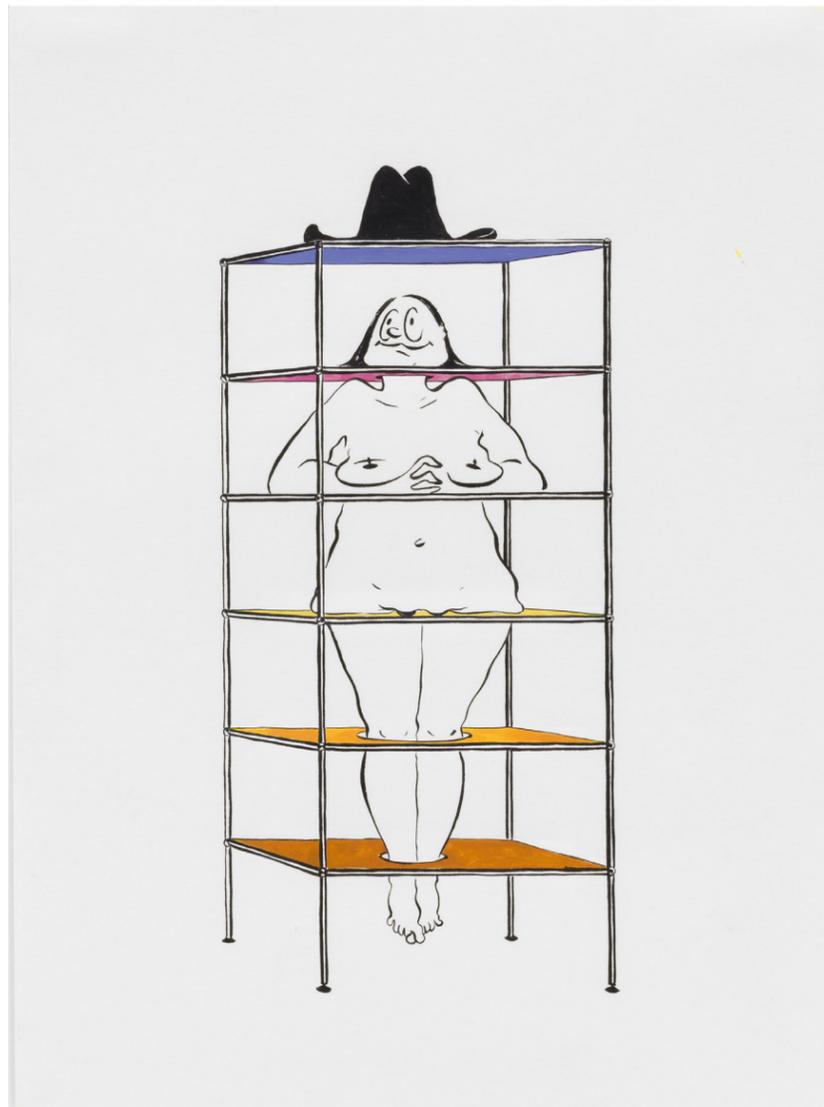


Tender, Freaky Vessel

Ebecho Muslimova
"Fatebe Digest"
David Zwirner
23 Nov – 23 Dec 2021

Swelling and star-arsed, the protagonist of Ebecho Muslimova's (*1984) artwork guts feminist theory with comedic charisma. Her orifices leak uncontrollably, failing to contain the anxieties that escape them. Birthed from Muslimova's creative frustration as an art student, the caricature of Fatebe inherits her name from a portmanteau of "fat" and "Ebe", the artist's nickname. An unexpected anti-hero, her gargantuan flesh and goggle-eyes wreak havoc on respectability. A bulls-eye between her legs, Fatebe is an absurd gloryhole in the punchline of a Kleinian joke. Yet it is hard to discern exactly what the gag is – which, of course, is precisely the point.

"Fatebe Digest" is a voyage of sexual and emotional absurdity. The Russian-born, New-York based artist begins her exhibition with a series of inked works on paper, wherein Fatebe finds herself in a series of farcical quandaries. Nipples ever-erect, she is a solitary figure in a comic abyss. As we follow Fatebe's x-rated escapades, we feel hot shame. The character cork-screws her body, slotting into domestic architecture like a tired key. In *Fatebe Coat Rack* (2021), her drooping flesh hangs from a coat-stand, synonymous with the hide of a cow. Conversely, in *Fatebe 60° Anniversario* (2021), Fatebe is seated with an excremental companion in a beret, recalling Piero Manzoni's 1961 *Merda d'artista*, in which the Italian avant-gardist produced cans of his own faeces. The spectacular focal point of each drawing is the character's vaginal orifice, exaggerated to the point of ridicule so as to be penetrable by all. One might argue that Muslimova employs



Fatebe USM Sunset, 2021, sumi ink and watercolour on paper, 30.5 x 23 cm

abjection to dissect representations of female sexuality, in the vein of artists like Carolee Schneemann or Kiki Smith. Yet, it is hard to walk away from these erotic encounters with such political clarity. This is the paradox of the work: Fatebe invites us to consider our socially transgressive fantasies, while refusing to be easily digested as such. Instead, the character becomes a back-door to what queer theorist Jack Halberstam terms "low theory": eccentric forms of knowledge production, which risk being dismissed as ridiculous.

If Muslimova's ink drawings are an introduction to Fatebe's visual

world, her oil paintings are an expansion of the character's existential reckonings. In line with the artist's recent 2021 exhibition at the Drawing Center in New York, the paintings activate grotesque dramas pulled from sub-levels of the mind. In *Fatebe Octopus* (2021), the protagonist pantomimes as a sea creature, a hysterical smile plastered across her magenta face. In the painting opposite, *Fatebe BTS Mechane* (2021), she explodes into a crowd of delirious, multi-coloured skeletons, a skull gripped between her toes. The work adopts a trope known as the *danse macabre*, pointing to the

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equalising force of death across humanity. Originating from medieval poetry, the visual allegory often depicted skeletons escorting humans to their graves in a playful waltz. Fatebe is well-versed in her own death-drive, both creating and escaping disastrous impasses with determined, brazen force. Her sexual exuberance is a vehicle to elicit emotional identification through humour, fear, and desire. Muslimova posits the buxom bimbo as a psycho-social subject worthy of our tenderness, a vessel for unabashed vulnerability.

The exhibition culminates in *Fatebe Theatre Mural* (2021), the cen-

trepiece of the artist's melodrama. A hand painted installation foregrounds Fatebe's plump flesh, draped along the seats of a cinema, a urine-yellow light projected from her buttocks. It is no wonder Muslimova's satirical style has been likened to that of Iranian-American artist Tala Madani, who adopts projections and abject imagery to critique dominant power structures. Like Madani, Muslimova has the sharp wit of an editorial cartoonist-turned-psychoanalyst, excavating the depths of obscenity in search of meaning. The mural depicts Fatebe, puckering her lips to embrace the feet of an infant clutching

a skull. Pleasure, failure, and melancholy are all present in this fateful meeting. The artist draws on the Russian term *жертва* (*zhertva*) to describe Fatebe, which denotes victim, prey, and sacrifice all at once. Her extreme care for, and symbiosis with, the experiences of her caricature are evidence that empathy is essential to critical frameworks of thought. Muslimova's work is not to everyone's liking, and that is fine. It is a form of indigestion; an attestation that a vulgar joke can encompass more cultural weight than the theoretical musings it points to.

Tamara Hart

Fatebe Theater Mural, 2021, acrylic paint and charcoal on plaster wall, 280 x 590 cm
 Installation view, David Zwirner, 2021



Courtesy: the artist and David Zwirner. Photo: Anna Arca