

THE DRAWING CENTER

Interview with Ebecho Muslimova



Installation view: Ebecho Muslimova: *Scenes in the Sublevel*, The Drawing Center, New York. February 5 – May 23, 2021. Photo: Daniel Terna

Rosario Güiraldes: I'd like to begin by asking you about the title of the exhibition, *Scenes in the Sublevel*. I think it's a clever choice of words because it refers both to the exhibition's physical space—literally a lower level gallery—as well as to the psychological or emotional space from which the scenes depicted in each of the panels are drawn out. How did you arrive at this title?

Ebecho Muslimova: The title of the show refers, like you said, to the literal sublevel of The Drawing Center, as well as to some notion of the subconscious and the base instincts that Fatebe operates with. I titled the show when I was nearing the end of coming up with the scenes presented in the panels. I always thought Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* was such a great title and tried to do a Fatebe version of it, in that it carries similarities to this idea of a borderline character in solitude experiencing some sort of breakdown. Also "sublevel energies," a physics term, resonates with me as some crucial process of reality that I also don't understand. So I decided to use it because it feels like a deep, murky, essential thing that I can only sense without really grasping, much like the process of pulling out Fatebe.

RG: I'm curious about your process: How does it start? Because you have, on the one hand, your alter ego Fatebe, whose role is to activate each scene. On the other hand, you have the spaces, objects, and circumstances she encounters. Is there a methodology in place with regard to how each drawing is constructed and how it begins, or does it change constantly?

EM: There's definitely no methodology. I wish for one when I am in the pains of working through a Fatebe scene, but the drawings that do follow a formula feel most like failures and are ultimately abandoned. The pairing of scene to her body/action works for me when it clicks and feels right in some combination of dumb, abject, and funny. Sometimes my process starts with looking at images for hours or days, searching for some kind of shape of tension—which is how I would describe what the quest feels like. Then I have to stop doing that because I get frustrated with not finding it. Then I draw her doing nothing in particular—only her body in gestures that illustrate my frustration. Then after I sleep all that off, hopefully, luckily, some scene pops out onto the paper.

RG: Fatebe existed only in drawing up until three years ago when you incorporated painting into your practice, which you explained came out of a desire to explore with texture and color. In a recent conversation about the specific body of work you made for The Drawing Center we talked about how the panels incorporate elements from drawing and painting and are also site-specific, and you stressed the importance of "keeping a balance" between the different mediums and techniques. I really like how you play with this idea of destabilizing medium specificity and wonder how this approach—the incorporation of multiple mediums for this specific body of work—has impacted your work in general, and its formal and narrative possibilities?

EM: I'm not sure how this show has impacted my work in general yet—I guess I'll see what happens next in reaction to it. I was trying to have the mediums in the panels compete with each other just enough to contrast with the self-sufficiency and reliability of Fatebe. I wanted it to come through in the show that she is the only element that is constant and concrete. Before I began painting with her, I was afraid that she would get translated to be a painting version of the drawing. I worried that it would undermine her and what she is, always a line drawing. Happily, this didn't happen and I am able to keep her nature intact. What I am trying to do now is expand her range and make sure that rather than diluting her character with this process, it adds to her singularity.

RG: It's interesting to think about the idea of time in your drawing practice. You recently expressed to me the notion of drawing as "thoughts turned into line in the present tense." Can you speak a little more to that idea?

EM: When I started drawing her as a regular practice I wanted to challenge myself in that there could be a Fatebe for every occasion, for every mood. Not like a drawing-a-day thing, which I tried and it got very boring, but that she could appear as a representative of any mental drama I am experiencing. So here is how time entered the project: I didn't need the hindsight to come up with a Fatebe to represent something I thought or felt—she is my thoughts and feelings represented in real time as I am experiencing them. What I mean is that most times I can learn from her what I was thinking and feeling as I drew her. Aside from Fatebe, I do think that drawing—the line, to hand, to eyes, to mind connection—can be immediate. The mind informs the hand to draw the line, and line then informs the mind to think the thought, and on it goes.

RG: When we've talked about Fatebe's occupation of physical space and confidence in her body, you've indicated that these attributes are the character's form of self-expression. But inevitably one is also led to think that the fact that you are drawing a character that is free of the stereotypes typically projected onto the female body constitute a kind of rejection of gendered expectations. Is this political dimension of your work a deliberate one, or what do you make of it? In other words, why is it important that Fatebe is exuberant?

EM: I'm not sure that Fatebe rejects gendered expectations—she's very feminine and certainly the expectations of the female gender are both of being gentle and hysterical. I'm not designing her to seem a certain way—I am an emotional person and that is why she is so exuberant. She expresses an urge that I cannot in actual life. So, she works for me and performs what I need her to do for me to feel relieved. In that way Fatebe seems to be doing exactly what is expected from her gender: emotional labor, etcetera.

RG: In the drawings on view it's not clear whether Fatebe accidentally falls into compromising situations or whether she creates them. But regardless of whether or not she is the mastermind behind these actions or a victim, it seems like she seeks pleasure from them. Her facial expressions and bodily gestures—the way she presents herself as she is, fully uncensored and smiling—suggest that regardless of whether she is or isn't the creator of those circumstances, she enjoys being seen while involved in them.

EM: Fatebe is a solution to a problem. The circumstances she finds herself in are the quandaries that she has to face. There's a word in Russian, жертва, that means victim, prey, and sacrifice all at once, and that is the role into which she is cast and that she always manages to slip out of. This performance, this slippage through the challenges I constantly make for her, is what interests me and pushes the search for new scenarios.

RG: You've told me that comic relief is important to you and that Fatebe's original purpose was, and continues to be, to be funny. Would you say too that humor and absurdity in your work are ways for you to negotiate your own personal anxieties in terms of making and showing work?

EM: Yes definitely! Making work and showing work is raw and vulnerable and touches every insecurity. My only balm is humor.

RG: Is the humor in your work a way to create a moment of empathy from the viewer?

EM: Humor, if it works, elicits an emotional response from the viewer that is the vehicle for real communication. Whether it is empathy or something else depends entirely on the viewer.

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