

In Fatebe, Ebecho Muslimova Has Created An Abjected Double, A Vessel Of Curiosity And A Kind Of Superhero

Posted on November 28, 2019 by ADAM LEVNER

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Fatebe (FAT: e-be) is in the midst of the Lacanian Mirror Phase. "She's starting to interact with her own image and own sense of self versus the drawing of herself," says her creator, the New York-based artist Ebecho Muslimova. "The film *Ev-Machina*, popped in my mind, she's looking at herself in a mirror, self-making. I feel like I'm drawn more and more into the relationship between her and her own image!"

But the Mirror Phase is supposed to be traumatic, correct? The child looks in the mirror and thinks, "That... that... me!" And if not traumatic exactly, then it's certainly traumatic. On the inside, we see chaotic, pathological, formless. On the outside, we are a stable entity, more or less. But Fatebe, as rendered by Muslimova, appears totally unfazed by the realization of her own image. A viewer can intuit a wish fulfillment of sorts. Fatebe is Muslimova's curiosity without limits.

"Fatebe" is the absurdist, zany, imagistic alter-ego of Muslimova, and is now the subject of a stunning series of oil paintings and drawings at Muslimova's current solo show *TRAPS* at [Magenta Plaza](#). Muslimova has been obsessively drawing her since enduring a trying period towards the end of her education at Cooper Union (around 2013). Frustrated and struggling to meet the demands placed upon her by professors to make the kind of "official" conceptual artwork that is catnip to the up-they-own-asses art world elites—Muslimova literally tore up a number of works she made during the period—and enduring other assumed life anxieties, the early illustrations of Fatebe were born of Muslimova's desire to make "my 'safe' art." There has to be some kind of "trauma drama" in order to make something earnest," she explains in the back room of Magenta Plaza. "It has to come from a place in which you weren't feeling very earnest. You wouldn't draw cartoon pussy if you weren't in some way blocked."



Ebecho Muslimova, Fatebe Deep Frog Organism, 2019. Oil and acrylic on canvas, 60h x 46w in.

In short, Fatebe was born of her creator's dejection. When she started drawing Fatebe—always naked and exposed, often humiliated—she had given up on the art world. She didn't want to draw her work to anyone. She imagined the filching obsessive drawing of this abjected alter-ego as a comic joke on her life. "Fatebe literally came out of a juvenile tantrum that I was having," says Muslimova. "I decided that I was going to draw this one character my whole life, and people would see me hobbling down the street at 60 years old and would say, 'That's Ebecho's draw the same thing her whole life.' And the joke became real. I can't do anything else. It's funny."

The heated irony of the joke is that Muslimova has found real success with her countless illustrations and paintings of the character (it appears that the Magenta Plaza exhibition currently up has sold out of all the pieces). In a contemporary art culture saturated with boring, serious artists making boring, serious works dealing with relational aesthetics or identity politics and so on, Muslimova's direct, frank, occasionally shocking, and most importantly, hilarious Fatebe works truly stand out as a coveted group show. It would appear that we all crave the kind of clarity of image and directness in communication that Fatebe evokes. In Fatebe Bear Trap, for instance, Fatebe is trapped in a bear trap. Make of that what you will.



Ebecho Muslimova, Fatebe Bear Trap, 2019. Sumi ink on paper, 9h x 12w in.

From a psychoanalytic standpoint, what is most fascinating about Muslimova's work with Fatebe is that the artist has, what she describes as, a very real relationship with her creation. She talks about her like she's a real person who is enduring an in-real-time life on a chronological continuum. In a lecture at [Swiss Institute](#) in which Muslimova described her ongoing work in creating Fatebe, she showed a number of slides of early drawings of Fatebe and said that each represent a new experience, a new memory, in the life of this character. "First date," "first fart," "first snake," and so on. All artists, of course, have deep relationships with the works that they create (or they should, assumedly), but I'd wager that very few have relationships as deep as the one between Muslimova and Fatebe.

Kate believed that to humiliate someone was to deny that person's very humanity. And yet, despite the closeness between Muslimova and Fatebe, Fatebe endures all manner of physical and psychological humiliations at the mercy of Muslimova's libidinal imagination. But there is a kind of wish fulfillment going on. Fatebe is, in a sense, a purple pig for Muslimova's most basest curiosities. Fatebe caught in a net, Fatebe sitting pasta, and Fatebe swallowing frogs en masse are just a few of the humiliating scenarios Muslimova has cooked up for her alter-ego in her most recent exhibits. Illustrations of the character show the artist to explore how we become others from her consciousness. But simultaneously, Muslimova has empowered her character, forming a unique communicative flow between the artist and her creation, in which the artist can humiliate the character but the character can seemingly endure any humiliation without breaking a sweat.

"She's relishing in [humiliation], because she's my surrogate," says Muslimova. "There's real consequences to falling in holes for me or whoever, so she can explore those surreal degradations in a way that I wouldn't allow myself to. She's vulnerable, and kind of a snarker. But she's just getting through these holes. I'm getting her through, and she can stand up to her creator." Slavoj Žižek said that the true measure of love is the ability to insult one another, and if this is true, it's clear that Muslimova truly adores Fatebe.



Ebecho Muslimova, Fatebe Nest, 2019. Oil and acrylic on canvas, 60h x 60w in.

Muslimova's Fatebe illustrations have garnered comparisons to other artists that use her used illustration: Raymond Pettibon, Peter Saul, early 20th Century French satirist Honoré Daumier, and others. Beyond a shared medium, however, it's hard to see how. While those artists respond in real time to current events, Muslimova reaches into the recesses of her mind. These are evocations of the naughty black ink drawings of late 19th century British erotic illustrator Aubrey Beardsley in the sheer distaste and decadence of the images. Suspiciously, critics have failed to detect connections between Muslimova and the Swedish artist Marie-Louise Ekman. Though Ekman is a painter, the cartoonish figures that populate her paintings delight in corporal and sexual debasement, similar to the one evoked by Fatebe. On Ekman's own terms, "after Daumier," her work is consistent, emotional and humorous, and perhaps even a bit repulsive—if the subject matter of personal relations ever can be." Like Ekman's debased figures, Fatebe offers a broadly detached understanding of what it means to inhabit a body.

But Muslimova has also achieved something that none of these artists have. "Fatebe is Muslimova's invention, which is every cartoonist's dream—to make a memorable character," writes [John Doe \(az-Zykenberg\)](#). In contrast to the aforementioned artists, Fatebe is the sole vessel for Muslimova to explore the recesses of her subconscious mind. It's hard not to infer psychoanalytic implications from Muslimova's decision to continuously render the same character, her self-described alter-ego, into all manner of surrealist emotional and corporal disturbances. Fatebe could be viewed, from a certain perspective, as a manifestation of what theorist Julia Kristeva would have called "the double" in her text *Powers of Horror: Essay in Abjection*: a place where boundaries between subject and object begin to breakdown. Kristeva believes that we are continuously drawn to the subject, which could psychologically explain Muslimova's enduring fascination with drawing Fatebe—a character that was literally birthed from an aspect period of her life.



Ebecho Muslimova, Fatebe Charming (snake), 2019. Sumi ink on paper, 9h x 12w in.

But, as Kristeva says, "Abjection is above all ambiguity." Though a viewer can infer some psychoanalytic level in Muslimova's paintings and drawings of Fatebe, it is rather impossible to discern what, if anything, these works say about Muslimova's psychology or emotional state specifically. On the contrary, Fatebe has given Muslimova a creative technique of self-exploration while providing a buffer between her psychology and the audience. She can give her viewers a window into her mind without ever allowing them to see anything specific about her mind. Muslimova's psychology takes on a hominess in these works; we understand that it's present, but can't see the thoughts, experiences, and traumas that shape and drive it. Muslimova says that the choice to render Fatebe in black line drawings is that the process and shading of painting can infer subtlety, which she actively sought to avoid. "What Pettibon does is almost more revealing of who he is because to react to current events is to reveal his own inner feelings about those events," observes Muslimova. "Drawing is an evidence of thought because it's so immediate, but like the dark wall of my own psyche, no one can see that [in these drawings]. [Fatebe] allows me a sense of privacy somehow."

TRAPS is testament to the riveting formal evolution of Fatebe's illustrative existence. Though the show still features a number of black ink drawings, Muslimova has also rendered Fatebe on large-scale canvases in a number of oil paintings, each sumptuously detailed and emphasizing the character in exciting new ways. But it should also be noted, the paintings only obscure her background. Fatebe remains a monocromatic line illustration. Muslimova credits the choice to render Fatebe to larger canvases to the desire to expand the space around her. "The different textures and illusions of space in the painting reinforce her black and white flatness around her. It's like she's trapped, as a drawing has more freedom and dimension in her art," she says. But on a more emotional level, she notes, "I also just wanted to try painting because it scares me."



Ebecho Muslimova, Fatebe Landing Falanx, 2019. Oil and acrylic on canvas, 66h x 60w in.

In Fatebe Landing Falanx, for instance, we see her caught in a leafless tree, visually distorted to stress the delirious confusion of the situation, while her failed parachute is pictured off below the branches. The larger canvases provide the audience a clearer relationship between Fatebe and the audience. But the overall approach is the same. Fatebe is never the subject of a cartoon or animation, her image is always frozen in time, a picture. Round bodies, of course, were that photographic new life deaths, still life that freeze present moments into eternal pasts, prefiguring the stiffness of the corpse. Fascinatingly, then, Muslimova is making photographs of Fatebe from the imaginary, nonexistent cartoon. This concept elevates the notion that we are being allowed to watch the life of this character through still images, and that every image that Muslimova creates allows to the inevitability of the character's demise. This technique yields a heightened relationship between the viewer and Fatebe; we empathize with her, we root for her, she's the hero of this implied narrative. "I trace her in the ideal angle that I want her to be seen in," says Muslimova. "It's important that she's frozen and that we are seeing her from the angle that we are seeing her."

What Muslimova implies here is that it's not just the situations in which Fatebe finds herself that communicate meaning to the viewer, but Fatebe's body posture as well. And not just placement of her limbs, and her poses and positions, but the folds of her belly and the lines of her curves are all exploited as expressive body. Much like Butch dancing, the body is used as the primary performative tool in drawings of Fatebe, and Muslimova retains hyper-focus on how the body is depicted in each of the works. "The folds of her elbows, even those can be expressions," she explains. "Whenever things are happening with the body, it's a performance in a way, right?"

While some artists spend careers trying to find their aesthetic and voice, Muslimova has created one singular image that is able to inhabit so many of the avenues artists seek to explore. Fatebe is a ripuration on the expressive potential of the human form, an abjected alter-ego that allows Muslimova self-exploration without the risk of over-exposing herself, a source of humor, transgression and absurdity, and her face is kind of a signifier. It is simply impossible to get bored looking at drawings of her. We watch her to grow new, we wait for her to age, and we want Muslimova to keep drawing her. This "psychothic version of herself" that was once a tool for Muslimova to "roughen her creative urges" without exposing herself to the exhausting scrutiny of the art market is now on its way to becoming something that Muslimova never intended to create: a contemporary visual icon. Muslimova's fascinating Fatebe drawings prove that artists should learn to stop worrying and love their needless doodles.

Adam Lehrer is an artist, photographer and writer. Lehrer's work consists of manipulated photographs, collages made of mostly internet sourced appropriated images, and video loops. He has had solo shows at *Spring Break Art Show*, Governor's Island Art Fair and has been featured in group shows at *Writing*, *Leher* is also a culture writer, and his art, film and music criticism has been featured in *Austin Magazine*, *The Quietus*, *Forbes*, *VICE*, *Beffront* & *Bowery*, *Bunker Muck*, *1-8*, *ISSUEC*, and more.

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