

INTERVIEW BY NATASHA STAGG
PORTRAIT BY JAMES EMMERMAN



emERGING ARTIST EBECHO
mMUSLIMOVA CREATED FATEBE,
a SHAMELESS AND SEXUALLY
LIBERATED ALTER EGO.



EBECHO MUSLIMOVA, *FATEBE SPECERE MURAL*, 2022, ACRYLIC ON WALL AND OIL ON CANVAS STAGE MUSLIN, HANGING ROD, CABLES, WALL PAINTING 204 3/4 X 315 INCHES, PAINTING ON CANVAS 90 1/2 X 66 7/8 INCHES, FROM THE EXHIBITION "FUN FEMINISM," KUNSTMUSEUM BASEL, 2022, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND GALERIE MARIA BERNHEIM, PHOTO GINA FOLLY

NATASHA STAGG — When did you first arrive in New York?
EBECHO MUSLIMOVA — I got to New York in November of '91, a month before my seventh birthday and a couple of months after the Soviet Union fell. But my mom came in '89, and then there was the whole political shit-show. We finally got out in '91 while there was a little opening. We were very lucky because afterward, the gates got shut again, and people were separated for way longer.

NATASHA STAGG — And you came from where?
EBECHO MUSLIMOVA — I was born in Dagestan, moved to St. Petersburg, and then came here. We came straight from JFK Airport to Inwood, uptown. That was the first apartment. And we came really late at night, so I don't remember any of my surroundings, but I remember getting out of the cab and going to the apartment. Then, in the morning, my mom took us all out for a walk through the neighborhood, and it was just a poor, normal uptown neighborhood — dollar stores, a park, bodegas, whatever — but I thought it was Times Square because there were no neon lights or advertisements in Russia. I remember seeing a lit-up Budweiser sign in the bodega. It was like seeing color for the first time. St. Petersburg was just buildings, the color that buildings are. When did you come to New York?

NATASHA STAGG — In 2011, after grad school.
EBECHO MUSLIMOVA — And had you already written your novel, *Surveys*?

NATASHA STAGG — Yes, but I hadn't gotten it published. I hadn't even sent it out.
EBECHO MUSLIMOVA — So, you had it under your arm and were like, "I'm going to New York!" What made you want to come here?

NATASHA STAGG — My sister was here, and I wanted to work in publishing. I had a pretty romantic version of working in publishing in my mind that I wanted to fulfill. Like, being in a dusty office surrounded by books and, I don't know, wearing big glasses or something. I still have never worked in book publishing.

[Laughs] I've never fulfilled my dream. So, you're seven, and you're living in Inwood. When was the first move after that?

EBECHO MUSLIMOVA — Then we moved to Washington Heights. We lived right next to Fort Tryon Park. We lived next to that train station that has the elevator that opens up into the park. It just opens out of a rock, which is the only thing I remember about it. [Laughs] And then we moved to Brooklyn, to Greenpoint. We all lived in this railroad apartment on North 8th and Bedford when it was just Polish people and Puerto Ricans. It was not hip.

NATASHA STAGG — It's probably one of the most expensive places to live right now, isn't it?

EBECHO MUSLIMOVA — Yeah. So, we lived there, five people in this railroad apartment, and the last year we were living there, the L Café opened, and the *Times* wrote about it, like, "The young people's café opens up." It was the first hipster point. Then, when we moved out — we moved to Jersey City — our apartment was rented for, like, three times the price.

NATASHA STAGG — Did you move out because they were trying to get you out, to raise the rent?

EBECHO MUSLIMOVA — No. It was because my mom got a better deal somewhere else. My mom's just been hustling here since we came. It's like the New York version of lifting the truck off your kids, where you just find real estate deals. I think that's my favorite part about New York, the stress-induced hustle-honing. It's like bootcamp. It's really corny, but if you can make it here, you really can make it anywhere. You get addicted to...

NATASHA STAGG — That hustle.
EBECHO MUSLIMOVA — Yeah. To the feeling that any incremental move one way or another counts. You can gauge your position in life that way.

NATASHA STAGG — Or maybe it's more like if you can make it here, you'll be able to continue to make it here. Because if you make it in New York, you might

have a hard time adjusting to other parts of America.
EBECHO MUSLIMOVA —

It's very hard to relax in New York. But then you see old people walking around, and you're like: "These people are New Yorkers. They survived."

NATASHA STAGG — So, you moved to Jersey City...
EBECHO MUSLIMOVA — I moved to Jersey City, but I went to high school in Manhattan, at LaGuardia [High School of Music & Performing Arts]. My mom had to get one of our friends to do a fake address so I could be registered as a New Yorker.

NATASHA STAGG — LaGuardia as in the film *Fame*.
EBECHO MUSLIMOVA — The *Fame* school. None of my friends were in the art program. They were all these fucked-up ballerinas. I mean, I was fucked-up, too, but for some reason, they were all ballerinas, and I would just go and watch them. But yeah, I was registered to live

in the East Village, so I had to go and pick up all the school mail that got sent to me there once a month. Every time I skipped school, they would send an absence report, but my parents would never get it.

NATASHA STAGG — Where did you go when you skipped class?

EBECHO MUSLIMOVA — We would hang out in front of Juilliard and chain-smoke there, at Lincoln Center. Then we would go to the Marriott because if you sneak past the check-in desk, you can just go to the lounge and get coffee. This is a real New Yorker thing. We would go to the Mind Tree in Central Park. There's this tree that, for generations, has been called the Mind Tree, and it's where all the druggie children of Upper Midtown would gather. There would be these old hippie dealers there who'd been dealing acid and weed to kids since the '70s. And we would just drop some acid and hang out at the Mind Tree. And then we'd go to Waverly Diner for endless coffee and cigarettes, six in a booth, and just hang out there or go listen to the hippies sing in Washington Square Park. I mean, I've had my parents call Waverly Diner before, looking for me.

NATASHA STAGG — I feel like, out of all the people I know who grew up here, you don't put it in front of every conversation, like many people do.

EBECHO MUSLIMOVA — Well, I feel like the people who are known as New York kids are the offspring of a certain social cachet, as if those were the only people in New York. But New York is not America. It's an open city. And I just haven't found a better city. New York changes, and it's a big, corporate mall and whatever else you want to sling at it. But I haven't found the energy — this either constant tipping-forward or falling-backward energy, which is not even healthy, but whatever — I haven't found it anywhere else.

NATASHA STAGG — It's a combination of things that make you keep going here. Some things, like the rising rent, you think, it would be better without,

but then, that's what makes the city, too. EBECHO MUSLIMOVA — Right. Money has always been rubbed into the noses of the poor from across the street here. I guess that's not unique to New York — lots of places have a stark difference.

What makes New York different is that there is a cruel sense of hope. Not that your position will change, but that somehow you can get swept... Like a dirty wind can gust through some dirty street and

sweep you into a different position.

NATASHA STAGG — I always stop myself from saying "the energy of New York." I just start to think of Broadway. [Laughs] But the magnetism of it probably has to do with the architecture, and the fact that it's an island, and it can't really grow, so it'll just grow up, you know? And then, it has to constantly be making moves to keep people around because if it were only rich people, then it would collapse. So, there's this snake chasing its tail, with what counts as the cool neighborhoods. And I think it is not just a wealth disparity that is so stark and close, but just literally people facing each other and saying, "That's the next thing" or "This is the next thing." Like, we're seeing into each other's windows.

EBECHO MUSLIMOVA — Yes. It's a rat cage.

NATASHA STAGG — It's a horrible place, but it's the best place. I mean, it's also that everybody else romanticizes it, so you feel on top of the world. EBECHO MUSLIMOVA — But that's how it perpetuates itself.

NATASHA STAGG — What's your perfect day in New York? EBECHO MUSLIMOVA — I've started walking across the bridge from my house to my studio... I live in Chinatown, and my studio's in Dumbo, and I'm one stop away, but because I have a tiny dog and zero time to walk it because I'm so busy, I take the opportunity to just walk across the bridge. I started doing it when it was nice out, and now I do it when it's not nice out. We just bundle up and go into the sleet when it happens.

NATASHA STAGG — And she's wearing a jacket. EBECHO MUSLIMOVA — She's wearing a jacket, I'm wearing a jacket, and we take the Manhattan Bridge because I live underneath one

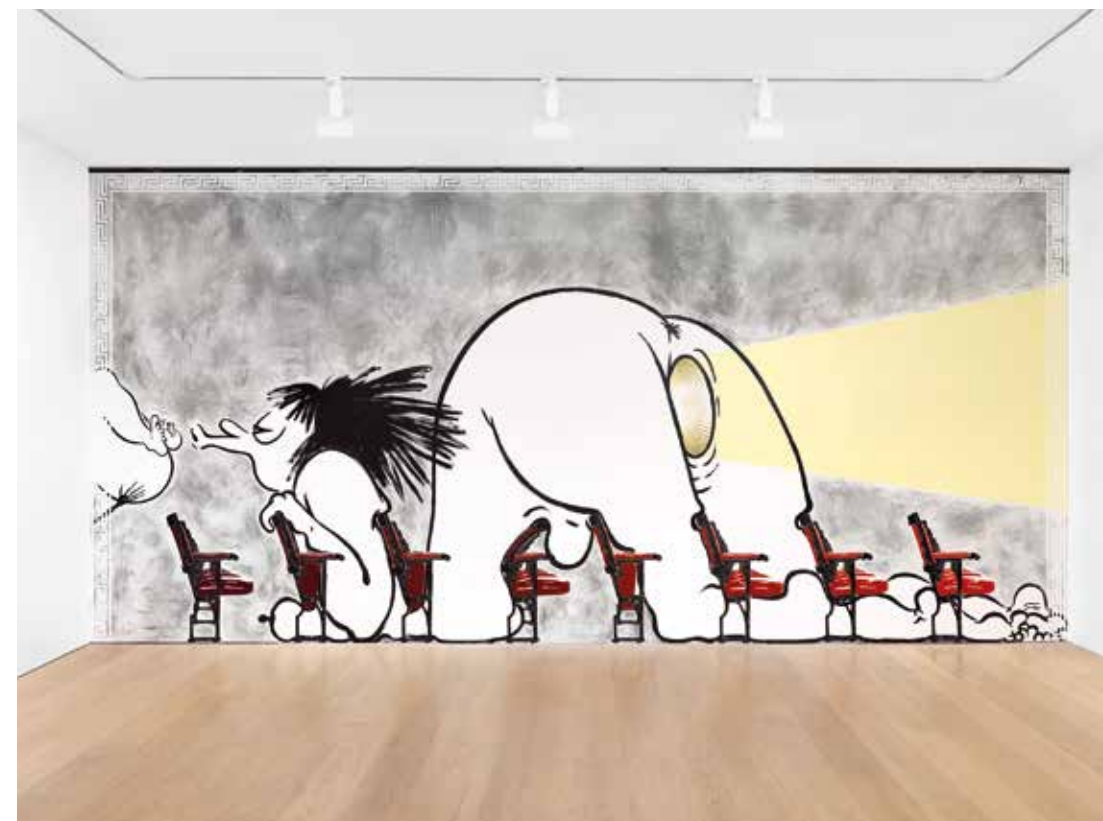
end of the bridge, and my studio is right next to the other end. I also feel like a New York City rat, scurrying from one end to the other. But a perfect day starts with that because you get the river view. Now, I'm fantasizing about what I would do if I had time to have a perfect day. Because I'm a workaholic — it's a New York syndrome — I like that all the museums are far away. I like walking. I love walking to the Garment District because it still feels like a New York that I remember. There are the street sellers. And you can do a two-hour walk to MoMA. And by the time you get there, you're exhausted. What's on your list?

NATASHA STAGG — For some reason, it makes me think of when I'm hungover and need some relief. If I do get out, which is what you're supposed to do when you're hungover — get air — I'll go to Mast, the bookstore. I'll go get a coffee — there are three new coffeeshops that just opened on my street. So, depending on my mood, I'll get a fancy Japanese coffee with rose petals floating in it. EBECHO MUSLIMOVA — Woah. Where is that?

NATASHA STAGG — It's this new coffeeshop that I'm sure won't last. On the corner of 2nd and A. EBECHO MUSLIMOVA — I love the East Village because it managed to stay cool and grimy. There's a grime that those places could not wash away.

NATASHA STAGG — We should talk about your show. EBECHO MUSLIMOVA — Oh, my show, if it doesn't kill me, will happen on January 13th at Magenta Plains. All of the paintings have to do with winter. It's a winter fog.

END



TOP: EBECHO MUSLIMOVA, *FATEBE BACKSTAGE*, 2022, OIL ON CANVAS, 84 X 73 INCHES, COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND GALERIE MARIA BERNHEIM

BOTTOM: EBECHO MUSLIMOVA, *FATEBE THEATER MURAL*, 2021, ACRYLIC ON WALL, DIMENSIONS VARIABLE, FROM THE EXHIBITION "FATEBE DIGEST," DAVID ZWIRNER, LONDON