

IN CONVERSATION

Susie Green and Harriet Cooper

HC: One of the first works you encounter in HYPERAROUSAL is a large painting in the JW Anderson store front window. This is one of a pair of new works called *Couples Therapy*, can you tell me a bit more about them?

SG: I started making these paintings during a relationship breakup, thinking about how humans get along with each other and the different power relationships at play. The compositions in the works are inspired by research I've been doing over the past year in the UK Leather and Fetish Archive at The Bishopsgate Institute in London, in particular imagery of inflation fetishes. I came across a striking image of a woman zipping someone inside an inflated rubber ball and it made me think about how humans find many different ways to feel safe in the world. Some more extreme than others. It might be lying under a blanket or being held by somebody; or, if you don't have someone to hold you, what else might you put on your body or what else might you need in your life.

In each of the paintings there is a female protagonist – a sort of self-portrait – and although only one person is obviously visible, I want to hint at the dynamic of another person being present. The title *Couples Therapy* alludes to this and, if you look carefully, you can find a little pair of lips or a hole for mouth or genitalia where a second person exists.

HC: The imagery that you are exploring in the UK Leather and Fetish Archive has been a starting point for quite a lot of your recent works. How have you found the process of working with this archive?

SG: I'm really interested in the territory of not quite knowing where something sits. In a lot of my work there is a sort of confusion between something being joyful and quite cheerful looking, and a more nuanced undertone to what is happening between the characters or protagonists in a painting. Out of the context of consensual adult play, some of the images from the archive can be read as violent encounters, or the scenario that is being acted out can appear to be degrading. When I paint these scenes they change and I'm able to reanimate these archival pre-internet images that are rarely seen anymore. A lot of the magazines I have looked at are made by men and centered on male fantasy, and I think it's important for there to be a space for female fantasies.

HC: One of the magazines that you've referenced that has a stronger female presence is *Madame In A World of Fantasy* which was published by SWISH who used to be based nearby in Soho Square. How has this influenced the new series of watercolours shown in HYPERAROUSAL?

SG: The imagery from this publication has been a starting point for the compositions of figures in the watercolours, and often I am thinking about the power dynamics at play – whether that be a sole figure, between a couple, or in a larger group. In these works I'm feeling my way, sort of trying to get inside the images, so this becomes a starting point I can work with.

Quite a few of the characters in this series are dominant female figures, for example in the painting *Madame Futura* she is positioned on an ornamental chair, possibly waiting for someone or perhaps watching a scenario play out. The colours I use are very instinctive and I tend to dress the protagonists in clothing I've seen elsewhere and online. It is a process of collaging imagery I've seen from one place to another, so it creates a totally new fantasy world.

HC: In many of your works, there are recognisable allusions to dress and fashion – the heel of a boot, lacing of a corset, or even in the hairstyles of the characters. How important are these and other references in your work?

SG: I'm inspired by lots of things – films, books, music, fashion, art, museums – all across the cultural spectrum, but I am often looking more directly at clothing and designers than other contemporary

artists. When I was younger, I had a game called *Fashion Wheel* which was a bit like the surrealist *Exquisite Corpse* game where you can collectively assemble a word or image. The game allowed you to move around different elements on the wheel and you ended up with these fantasy figures in imaginary outfits. In a way that is what I am doing in my work, building new scenarios and dressing the characters, rather than just replicating source imagery that I'm coming across.

I love the way that female musicians like Róisín Murphy use clothing and colour, there is such power, fun and pleasure in this which heightens her performances. When I came up with the title for this exhibition, I remembered a shop I used to go to in Kensington Market in the nineties called *Hyper Hyper*. It provided stall space for new designers including Pam Hogg and Leigh Bowery, and often had pieces that pushed the edges of fetish and clubwear in a way that shows up in my paintings now.

HC: The word 'hyperarousal' refers to a symptom of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) which often occurs as a trauma response, the fight-or-flight reaction. How did this become the title of the exhibition?

SG: I'd been thinking a lot about this word because it feels like it could have double meanings – although it is referring to a very real panic response in the body, it also sounds suggestive of someone being hyper-aroused or hyper-sexual. I experience quite a lot of anxiety and worry myself, as do many human beings, and there has been points in my life where I felt this fight-or-flight animalistic response.

When I was considering the title for the show, I wanted to use this word because I'm imagining the paintings as a way to overcome that experience. Both for me through the process of making them, and also going back to ideas of how people get by in the world – what they need to feel calm and safe. I feel like sex and eroticism is part of wellbeing and health; and whether that's by yourself or with somebody else, that is a way to manage stress.

HC: Finally, can you say a little more about how you approach painting and the relationship between the pieces in HYPERAROUSAL?

SG: I often make the small watercolors first; they are like preparatory sketches but also become works themselves. There is a lot of pleasure in making them as I paint quickly and intuitively, which enables me to get new ideas onto the paper.

Working on a larger scale is a much more physical process. I work on the paintings on the floor and can often only see the full impact if I stand up on a ladder, meaning that I become the perspective of the composition. Although I'm normally following some initial chalk marks I've made, the paint often breaks through these boundaries to create a beautiful flooding of colour which I like to encourage.

All of these paintings have an iridescent silver mixed in, which means in changing light they have a certain sparkle to them – an animation. Through my practice I've worked in lots of different mediums including with performance and singing in bands. One of the things I find challenging with painting is that it can be hard to commit to one image - when you're making a performance or a song, you can continue to move through and around a subject. Perhaps this slight changeability in the paint is a nod to that, that both the paintings and their subjects are not just decorative, static objects.

Susie Green is an artist who works across painting, performance, and sculpture, depicting powerful, adorned bodies looking for love, security, and belonging.

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