



## A Conversation between Kate Groobey & Omar López-Chahoud

**Omar López-Chahoud** You work in a wide variety of media. Did you start out as a painter with the installations, films and sculpture coming later?

**Kate Groobey** Yes, I always painted, then in 2015 I started radically questioning my practice and began to experiment. That was the year I moved to Paris. Through my partner, Jina Khayyer, who is in all my work, I was introduced to French electronic music and the fashion world – I think the idea of costuming and composing came in part from that. Also, this was the first time I was without a studio as I had just left London to live in Paris and I hadn't found a studio yet, so I was working at home. The way I paint with oils is really messy and stinks, so I wasn't keen on doing oil painting at home - that's when I started playing with video, sound and costume. I had been thinking about the idea of performance for a while and that situation, without the ability to paint, opened up the possibility to do something else – that was when I decided to delve further into the idea.

**OLC** A recurrent thing that you explore in your work, whether it is the videos or the paintings is that when you are constructing environments, the main player tends to be the human figure but I see that the work is increasingly becoming more personally connected to your own experience. Can you talk a little bit about that?

**KG** The human figure has always been of interest to me. When I was young, I was always interested in either doing something in psychology or painting – underlying everything is the interest in human psychology. Often my work is about coping mechanisms or emotions. I observe myself and the people around me. 2015 was a transformative year for me, where I questioned everything – my practice, my life choices. I was living outside of the UK for the first time, I was in love with a woman for the first time, so my work became more and more personal. Also, around that time my dad was diagnosed with cancer. I found that it was impossible for me to make any work that wasn't addressing these big feelings I had. This was the first time that I made work that was entirely autobiographical.

The first series where you can see all these massive changes is the *Perfect Potatoes* series – with characters like the "I Hate Everything Man", which is my father. In the *Perfect Potatoes* series you see the moon, which for me is symbolic of Jina; you see a character sitting potatoes which represents,

interchangeably, money and cancer; and you see the Statue of Liberty's crown, which represents female strength.

**OLC** In your recent work – *Start Again* – we see the same figure repeated, taking on certain characteristics, emphasising certain positions that the bodies are in, or certain parts of the body. Hands have been very important in all your work. I'm curious to know if you think of this figure as you. Do you think of the work as a kind of self-portraiture?

**KG** Hands are important for me. They're one of the main ways we connect with the world. I think of the figure in *Start Again* as a double portrait. Jina and I both use our hands to make work and we use the same tool – the pen – Jina to write and me to draw. In a way all my portraits are self-portraits because I'm constructing the narrative.

**OLC** It's interesting because you are talking about personal experience but I think that it transcends into something that a lot of people can relate to. The psychological space you talk about is very present in your work but it doesn't come in a very literal representation of portraiture, it becomes something else. It's not just that we are looking at a portrait, there is a lot of symbolism and we are looking at things that are quite open. I feel that with your work a lot of people can relate to it in many different ways. I'm intrigued about your process and how you navigate between performance, video and painting.

**KG** I always start with watercolours and drawing. The performance is the painting exploding out of the canvas. A bit like that 80's Eurythmics song "Sisters Are Doin' It For Themselves" – but instead of coming out of the kitchen, they're coming out of the paintings.

**OLC** For the video work, you set up a situation that is almost like Cabaret Voltaire, I can't help but think of those 1920's early forms of performance where things were really done using very basic techniques but were very effective visually. I see that simplicity in your work but it becomes a very complex process. I love the fact that it feels a bit like theatre. How are you approaching that in your work, is it just in your studio or do you work with an audience sometimes? You're performing for the camera?

**KG** They probably feel like theatre because my first film series was made for the theatre. I was working on my first films in Paris, in our apartment, in 2015. That year I showed my paper works in Paris at Ofr. and Coralie Gauthier, the curator of Silencio, David Lynch's club, saw and liked my work. I showed her my films and she invited me to show them in the Silencio cinema and afterwards perform live. At that time each of my

films were only a few seconds long – I had to figure out how to turn them into a 15-minute-long live performance. So, I made the whole first series of films for the theatre stage. Last year I did my first live performance in a gallery space, at RIBOT Gallery, for my first solo show in Milan. This year I actually had 5 live performances scheduled but obviously they have all been cancelled! [due to the COVID-19 pandemic].

**OLC** I love your work; the way that you use paint, how you work with the figure and the undertones of your work are very complex and that is how I really connect to it. A lot of things come into the work that I think make it really strong - gender and social issues for example. Can you talk a bit about what else feeds into the work, alongside the personal things we already discussed and perhaps which artists you are looking at? There is a long history of performance artists that have dealt with similar issues around sexuality and gender and I'm interested to know if you look at any of those?

**KG** I never really looked at female performance artists. That's maybe because of the education I had – I grew up in South Yorkshire in rural Sheffield and my early art education didn't really factor in any of that, but it did introduce me to the pleasures of making. Or maybe it's because I was always a tomboy and wanted to align myself with art-boys rather than girls. But that has been changing over the last five years and I've started looking at female performance artists like Rebecca Horn, Yayoi Kusama, the Neo-Naturalists.

**OLC** There are a lot of artists linked with the South of France where you live now and I wonder if you could talk a little about how any of them may have influenced you in terms of colour and light?

**KG** The artists that started me on my painting journey were the likes of Matisse and Picasso. Moving to the South of France they became closer, they were all here at some point because of the light which attracted painters in particular. Being here has made them more present in my mind, but not because of colour and light – I've been thinking about their male-ness versus my female-ness. I think about whether I should really be quoting them or not? It's become problematic in my work and I've started to address it more and more openly as it's been playing on my mind.

**OLC** Tell me the thoughts behind START AGAIN.

**KG** I started this new series at the beginning of 2020 and it was supposed to be a continuation of my last show *Assholes of Ambition* but when I was in the studio drawing and trying to develop things my thought process was

hijacked by Covid. It is pretty much a one image show of a figure crouching and holding a pen. A little bit like a record player that gets stuck – I got stuck on this one image. It's not a way that I have worked before but it felt right, as we were all stuck in lockdown. I was compelled to follow that feeling of being locked in a room with a single idea bouncing off the walls. It became an intense meditation on the idea of starting again. Each day, again and again. You see the character locked in union with her pen as the sun rises over and over – only the light changes, and the colours shift in an endless but hope-filled cycle.

**OLC** Is it all going to be paintings or are you including watercolours or film?

**KG** There's a big grid of watercolours and a single film which plays on repeat.

**OLC** So the watercolours go hand in hand with the larger paintings, do you make them simultaneously?

**KG** No, all the watercolours are done first before I move on to either making larger paintings or films.

**OLC** The watercolours are very beautiful as works in their own right, but I suppose the immediacy of the material is helpful as an idea is forming, do you see them as a warmup?

**KG** They're not really a warmup, they map out and transmit my ideas into the material world. They're a way of unravelling thoughts and emotions. They are how I build my series. Later the narrative develops further through the performance, that's where the story unfolds.

**OLC** The very nature of working with watercolours means that you have to work very quickly with transparent paint, that must allow for discovery in terms of imagery. Your work has this sort of freshness. When I look at your work, paintings or videos, I feel that the work has been made before my eyes which is something very special, to have that sort of connection to a piece. Now we've discussed the way that you approach making your work it makes complete sense that the watercolours are such an integral part of your work.

**KG** Also, it allows for an intuitive entry into building things because you can be so fast and things can just spill out. Almost like that Surrealist idea of things just unravelling.

**OLC** It's interesting that you mention a Surrealist idea. That's what I was getting at earlier when I was talking about the 1920's, like Cabaret Voltaire. I feel a Surrealist component in your work that surprises you in many ways and that immediacy and 'weirdness' – I mean that term as a complement! It is surprising how when you see all these paintings together they all seem to convey the same kind of emotions but they are all so different and they all have a different punch. I'm also very interested in your use of colours. I'm sure your use of colour must have been affected by living in the South of France with such incredible light.

**KG** Materiality is definitely linked to place. I feel the surfaces of my oil paintings have soaked up the spirit of Cezanne's mountain, Saint Victoire – which is a large chalk mountain I see every day on my morning run. My paintings have something of that chalky feel and they look as though they have been baked in the heat. And, yes, there is a crazy bleach white light here that's like nowhere else I've been. Colours look ultra-luminous here, it's really exciting, beautiful – one of the reasons I wanted to live here.

**OLC** I can't help but think of you as a sculptor as well. Because of the way you paint, it feels like you are using paint in a way that a sculptor renders three dimensionally. Is that something you're aware of or thinking about?

**KG** That's interesting that you say that. My first interest in looking at art was sculpture - that's what drew me in. But when it came to making things myself, I was far more interested in painting, putting colours on a page was so exhilarating to me – that was what I had to do.

This conversation was held remotely on September 4th 2020, Omar was in Miami and Kate in the South of France.

Omar López-Chahoud has been the Artistic Director and Curator of UNTITLED. since its founding in 2012. As an independent curator, López-Chahoud has curated and co-curated numerous exhibitions in the United States and internationally. Most recently, he curated the Nicaraguan Biennial in March 2014. López-Chahoud has participated in curatorial panel discussions at Artists' Space, Art in General, MoMA PS1, and the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City. López-Chahoud earned MFAs from Yale University School of Art, and the Royal Academy of Art in London.