

"WOMAN CRUSH WEDNESDAY: ILONA SZWARC", Interview by Adrian Knowler, *Musée*, January 29, 2020, <https://museemagazine.com/culture/2020/1/28/woman-crush-wednesday-unsex-me-here-by-ilona-szwarc>.



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JAN 29 WOMAN CRUSH WEDNESDAY: ILONA SZWARC

WOMAN CRUSH WEDNESDAY



Grinning and crying, 2019. Archival Pigment Print 24x30 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Make Room Gallery.

Interview by Adrian Knowler

The series title, *Unsex me here*, is a reference to a Lady Macbeth line from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. What is her character's significance to you and to this series?

Unsex me here is a body of work that grew, in part, out of a childhood memory of being bitten by a dog. In working on the series, I've been inspired by passages from Lady Macbeth as well as by Djuna Barnes' novel "Nightwood." In a previous body of work, I drew heavily from the writing of Angela Carter, who often returns to werewolf narratives. Since then, I've been wanting to somehow incorporate the notion of the flexible boundary between woman and beast in my own work.

In *Macbeth*, Lady Macbeth pleas to the spirits to get rid of her feminine qualities, to decontaminate her sex, to get rid of her excessive femininity. In order to perform the tasks she feels she has to, she needs to become "unsexed" -- to lose her gender entirely. She is a woman who refuses to behave like one; a threatening presence in the text for multiple reasons. I relate her threat to one presented by my character in *Unsex me here*. Unsexing isn't purely unsexing; it's a move away from the human as well.



The woman who presents herself to the spectator as a "picture" forever arranged, 2019. Archival Pigment Print. Courtesy of the artist and Make Room Gallery.

Have you felt, similarly to Lady Macbeth in the play, that societal notions of womanhood have limited you or dictated the way that you and your work is seen?

I often feel that my work is seen through the lens of my biography, or even through my appearance and performance as a woman artist. Personal history can be useful and important -- at a very basic level, I believe it is impossible to tell a story that is not one's

own. However, I sometimes feel burdened by the pressure of packaging the work into someone identifiable as “my story”. The need to have a story, whether it be of success or epiphany or change, seems to me a particularly American need. I am equally influenced by research and art history, which are qualities that would perhaps be focused on more acutely by my viewers if I was not a woman artist.



A hoof raised in the economy of fear, 2019. Archival Pigment Print, 38x48 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Make Room Gallery.

Talk a little bit about the repeated imagery of the dog and the dog mask prosthetic in the series. Does it relate to your ideas of femininity and the “unsexing” referenced in the series title?

I set out to build a narrative around a woman who is alone in an empty house with her dog. Various props, like the German Shepherd figurine, or even the dog being present on set, as well as the makeup props, were meant to set the stage and tell the story of her relationship with the animal and her process with makeup. This was my most narrative series to date. I used the repetition of the dog imagery as a vehicle of world building.



Such a woman is the infected carrier of the past, 2019. Archival Pigment Print, 24x30 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Make Room Gallery.

You've said that you sourced props and set pieces from websites like Craigslist and eBay. Why did you pick those sites for your materials? Were you looking for particular objects, or did you find inspiration in what was already posted for sale?

I often look at Craigslist, eBay, or Etsy for props that were previously owned by other people. I am interested in how these objects are photographed, described and documented by the owners who wish to sell them. Initially, I was planning a series of photos of the German Shepherd figurine that were inspired by the aesthetics of Ebay photographs -- intended by the owners to be the most objective, matter of fact portrayal. In reality, each object is usually photographed in a makeshift domestic setting, with other objects placed in the frame for scale and the domestic spaces creeping in at the corners.



Flesh that will become myth, 2019. Archival Pigment Print 24x30 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Make Room Gallery.

The sets evoke a time and place in which female domesticity was the societal norm. Why did you choose to use this juxtaposition of traditionally feminine backdrops and the jarring makeup?

I chose this location in Palm Springs because it is a Hollywood Regency interior design time-capsule. Frivolously over decorated, colorful and ornate, this decor is feminine and excessive. This style of interior design originated in the houses of famous actors and actresses of the Golden Era of Hollywood, the 1920s. I've been interested in this decor style as it pertains to Hollywood and femininity. Since I moved to Los Angeles, the film industry and its techniques have made their way to my work. So, in that sense, this was a perfect pairing - the inherently Hollywood decor with contemporary film special effects makeup. I intended the undercurrent of the female domesticity jarred by the abject transformation of my character.



Sometimes one meets a woman who is beast turning human, 2019. Archival Pigment Print, 24x30 inches.
Courtesy of the artist and Make Room Gallery.

Your statement on the series mentions a cultural dysphoria that you felt growing up in Texas as a Polish immigrant. How did your unique upbringing affect this series?

I base much of my work on my own life experiences as a woman and as an immigrant. I start from there, and then I look for characters - real or imagined - and details and spaces, vessels to communicate those ideas, conflicts, and stories. Having lived through several identity crises, occasioned by immigration, displacement, and the dissolution of my marriage, I am tirelessly consciously and subconsciously readjusting and composing myself. I am always switching between different expressions and personalities depending on what language I am speaking, never arriving at a fixed identity.



An image of a forgotten experience, 2019. Archival Pigment Print, 38x48 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Make Room Gallery.

Why did you choose to show the makeup stage of the production to the viewer? Why is showing the transformation an important part of this series?

The idea of revealing the process is very important to me. It ties back to my personal experience of cultural assimilation. I have led myself through a series of transformations - both internal and external, conscious and unconscious - to shed my cultural belonging. I constantly adjust my behaviors and appearance to fit into the cultural context. My characters never fully become, they are always in a state of unfinishedness, always suspended in the process of becoming.



Her hands seemed to take the place of the eye, 2019. Archival Pigment Print, 20x16 inches. Courtesy of the artist and Make Room Gallery.

Describe your creative process in one word.

Reading

If you could teach a one-hour class on anything, what would it be?

Large format camera

What was the last book you read or film you saw that inspired you?

The Waves by Virginia Woolf

What is the most played song in your music library?

Jolene by Dolly Parton

How do you take your coffee?

Black

Unsex me here can be seen in its entirety on the artist's website.