

## Serial Robbery in the Playground of Art History: On the Series *Stranger in Paradise* by Allison Zuckerman

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“The comic is an imitation; the grotesque, a creation.”<sup>1</sup>

Monumental women with gaping eyes and mouths, terrifyingly extroverted and grotesque, fill the surfaces of the large-scale canvases that Allison Zuckerman (b.1990, Harrisburg, PA) created in the summer of 2017 at the Rubell Family Collection, as part of an informal artist's residency program. In some paintings, two or three figures are gathered together, while in others they are presented alone in their full glory: one raises a mirror, a second holds a rotary dial phone, a third exposes her breasts over a music book, and a fourth holds playing cards. Already at first glance, the figures seem both familiar and strange, a kind of déjà vu. What they all share is the flickering gleam of an aura belonging to other figures—above all to women painted throughout the history of art by male artists. A second gaze quickly reveals that these figures are not homogeneous, but rather constitute a wild (and amusing) assemblage of body parts culled from numerous paintings that were created during different historical periods.

*Portrait of a Seated Woman*, for instance, features a female figure composed through a remarkable act of assemblage: her right leg was taken from Picasso; the knee comes from Google Images; her left leg was taken from Bronzino's *St. John the Baptist*; the purple scarf belongs to a portrait by Matisse; the breasts originated in one of Zuckerman's own earlier paintings; the awkward black-and-white hand is part of a painting by Richard Prince that is a take-off on Picasso. And this is not all: the face was borrowed from another early painting by Zuckerman—a takeoff on George Condo quoting Picasso; the hat belongs to a portrait of Marie-Thérèse painted by Picasso; the blond mane belongs to Khloé Kardashian; and the cascade of hair was taken from Google Images. The eyes, nose, and ears come from three earlier paintings by Zuckerman. She calls this process "telephone"—a reference to the children's game that involves a continual disruption at every level of repetition so that the original message becomes "lost in translation."

Zuckerman's series *Stranger in Paradise* is thus the ultimate manifestation of the term *pastiche*, which was invented long before the Google Images era.<sup>2</sup> In the following discussion, I will examine the organized chaos that defines this series through two different prisms: that of feminist practices of appropriation, and that of the grotesque.

First, however, the nature of Zuckerman's organized chaos must be examined. A deceptive mixture of "high" and "low" exists, for instance, in *Restless Muse*: the

1. Charles Baudelaire as quoted by Robert Storr in *Disparities & Deformations: Our Grotesque* (exh. cat.), New Mexico: SITE Santa Fe's Fifth International Biennial, 2005 pp.12-13.



Richard Prince, *Untitled*, 2011, collage, pastel, charcoal and graffiti on paper, 11 3/4 x 10 3/4 in. (30.2 x 27.6 cm) © Richard Prince, courtesy the artist and Sadie Coles HQ, London

2. Fredric Jameson was the first to tie the practice of quotation to the term *pastiche*, which implies the loss of a sense of historicity and of the ability to preserve the past, as well as a sense of fragmentation and lack of continuity. See Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review* 146: 1984.



Peter Paul Rubens, *Venus, Cupid, Bacchus and Ceres*, 1612-13, oil on canvas, 55 1/2 x 78 3/4 in. (200 x 141 cm) © Collection of Museumslandschaft of Hesse, Kassel

3. All statements by the artist are quoted from a conversation with the author held in Miami in August 2017, unless otherwise noted.

figure's eyes, glasses, and lips were borrowed from earlier paintings by Zuckerman; the hat comes from Picasso; the chin belongs to Richard Prince; the thighs are from a painting by Gil Elvgren, an American painter who specialized in images of pinup girls and advertisements in the 1940s.

A hodgepodge of aesthetic languages and historical periods similarly characterizes the environments in which the figures are planted: in *Pygmalion and her Creation*, this environment consists of Cézanne's bathers; in *Creation in the Earthly Garden*, it's Van Gogh's starlit sky and cypresses; and in *Woman at her Toilette*, the backdrop consists of landscapes seen through the windows in Matisse's paintings. As in a secret code, the viewer is invited to decipher this collage of disparate images—a painting within a painting within a painting, much like a Russian nesting doll. The viewer thus discovers a weave of boldly colored figures and forms that is simultaneously seductive and repulsive.

This daylight robbery continues in *Creation in the Earthly Garden*, where three figures, two women and a man, are seen in poses quoted from Rubens's *Venus, Cupid, Bacchus and Ceres* (1613), and are placed in Van Gogh's illuminated starry night landscape, seated on a patch of grass taken from Google Image. The figure on the right, whose face and necklace were taken from a painting by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, holds one of Cézanne's apples and appears to be "spitting out" a blue liquid that turns purple as it drips out of a Lichtenstein pitcher. The head of the figure on the left was taken from a pre-Raphaelite painting by Frederick Sandys, while her eyes belong to Picasso. The face of the curly-haired male figure (the curls and fur on his shoulder were taken from Google Images) is a distortion of Picasso's Dora Maar and his hands are quotations of Picasso by Richard Prince. The robbery continues with the hats taken from Picasso, the glasses and lemon in the left-hand corner from Lichtenstein, and the arm holding a marker in the right-hand corner, which belongs to Mickey Mouse. An additional number of recurrent motifs serve as stamps confirming the act of appropriation. The work's title points to the scene's earthly quality, yet the liquid pouring out of the right-hand figure's mouth provides a key for a deeper understanding of the transformative symbolic act depicted in this painting. According to the artist, her intention "was to comment on the process of artistic creation and myth building. The liquid that is streaming from the right figure's mouth, changing color through the Lichtenstein cup, and out of the canvas, is my way of depicting how paint physically can transform itself from a liquid medium into an image, and also how ideas can transform themselves depending on their context."<sup>3</sup> The changing liquid can thus be interpreted much like the aforementioned game of telephone, reflecting how ideas can be transformed through their repeated communication.

Further discussion will benefit from briefly attending to Zuckerman's technique, which enables this organized chaos and endows these works with their contemporary quality rendering them so highly relevant to our time. The process always begins with a digital manipulation: Zuckerman constructs each composition as a Photoshop collage composed, as we have seen, of numerous sources—blending art history, internet culture, details from her own works, social media, Google Images, and her autobiography as forms of visual data—that are all equal in value and available for recycling. She then prints the enlarged version of the collage. Once the printed canvas is stretched, Zuckerman paints over certain areas. At this stage (which she refers to as an "underpainting"), she adheres to several self-imposed rules: images that were originally photographs are not painted over in color, whereas elements culled from paintings may be treated with additional brushstrokes

to enhance and revitalize the image. When asked in one interview about the dry, technical quality of digital printing, her answer revealed the importance she ascribes to the act of painting: "Painting is still at the core of my artistic practice, but working digitally allows me to shorten the distance between thought and expression."<sup>4</sup>

#### Quotation as Sampling Remix or Visual Hyper-Link

The power of Zuckerman's work lies in this combination of cutting-edge digital printing techniques and the tradition of art history, which enables her to treat the digital inventory as an endless visual database from which she can take as many samplings as she desires, while responding to the media deluge that floods us. As she puts it, "When I repeat an image, I like to think of it as visual hyperlinking, creating a sense of déjà vu and linking one painting or sculpture to the next. . . . Collaging has a way of creating planes within planes, implying space within flatness. I want to create work that moves and feels as ephemeral and disjointed as the media deluge we are confronted with on a daily basis."<sup>5</sup>

The most notable samplings in this series are the recurrent motifs that reappear in almost all of the works, serving as anchors that elucidate its meaning or as codes for its interpretation, most prominently Cézanne's apples and Lichtenstein's bowl of fruit. For Zuckerman, both motifs represent "taking the fruit of art history," while serving as symbols of plenty and of Eros, as well as of the act of seduction leading to the expulsion from the Garden of Eden. Yet much like the difference between Van Gogh's peasant shoes and Warhol's *Diamond Dust Shoes*, the difference between these two types of fruit represents two fundamentally divergent approaches to the question of representation, which constitute perhaps the most central distinction between the modernist project and postmodernism. Whereas Cézanne's voluminous apples, which Zuckerman describes as impossible to find in any photograph of an actual apple, were painted from "nature," and are a representation of the real world as still life, Lichtenstein's flat bowl of fruit, by contrast, is a representation of "culture," since it was culled from a Cubist still life.<sup>7</sup>

In a different sense, the flying parrot that appears in almost all of the paintings in this series can also be interpreted as a key metaphor for the act of imitation. This motif, which was taken from Google Images, is also an allusion to Jeff Koons's inflatable sculpture. And like Sherrie Levine's series of gilded bronze sculptures (*Loulou*, 2004), here too the parrot is charged with the symbolic significance of repetition, which inherently involves a disruption. Yet in contrast to Levine, whose act of appropriation critically addressed the history and mythology of the monolithic (male) modernist canon, Zuckerman's work seems to contain no vestiges of a historical hierarchy, or of any hierarchy whatsoever. Moreover, whereas Levine carefully appropriated an entire work in each case, each of Zuckerman's works contains a multiplicity of sources crowded into a single composition. In any event, it seems that Levine's original "fakes" from the 1990s set the stage for the emergence of Zuckerman's practice two decades later, in which the quoted works come together to create a collage-like entity in a virtual universe devoid of any meaningful "origin."

Another recurrent motif is the pair of awkwardly painted black-and-white hands from a painting by Richard Prince, who quoted them from Picasso, thus including her in this sequence of appropriations. Indeed, Zuckerman's practice places her in the context of a long series of artists whose central strategy is quotation: Komar and Melamid, Yasumasa Morimura, Mike Bidlo and Cindy Sherman, among many others. These prominent artists, whose work in the 1990s endowed the concept of appropriation with its contemporary significance, all transformed the act of



Paul Cézanne, *Basket of Apples*, 1893, oil on canvas, 25 7/16 x 31 1/2 in. (65 x 80 cm) © Collection Art Institute of Chicago



Roy Lichtenstein (1923-1998). *Still Life with Crystal Bowl*, 1972. Oil and acrylic on canvas, 52 x 42 in. (1332.1 x 106.7 cm), Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; purchase, with funds from Frances and Sydney Lewis 77.64 © Estate of Roy Lichtenstein Digital Image © Whitney Museum, NY



Peter Paul Rubens, *Jupiter and Callisto*, 1611-13, oil on canvas, 120 x 79 1/2 in. (305 x 202 cm) © Collection Museo del Prado



Sherrie Levine, *Loulou*, 2004, bronze, 12 x 6 1/2 x 7 1/2 in. (30.5 x 16.5 x 19cm) © Sherrie Levine, courtesy David Zwirner Gallery, New York

4. Barry N. Neuman, "The Immersive World of Painter Allison Zuckerman," *Whitehot Magazine*, May 2017 <https://whitehotmagazine.com/articles/immersive-world-painter-allison-zuckerman/3671>

5. *Ibid.*

6. See Meyer Schapiro's interpretation of Cézanne's apples as a code for Eros: Meyer Schapiro, "The Apples of Cézanne: An Essay on the Meaning of Still-Life," 1968, in *MODERN ART 19th & 20th Centuries*, pp. 1-38.

7. Jameson defined the schism between modernism and postmodernism by comparing two pairs of shoes: Van Gogh's peasant shoes, which represent the peak of modernism, and the shoes depicted in Andy Warhol's series *Diamond Dust Shoes*, which represent the spirit of postmodernism. Jameson defines the schism between these two approaches in terms of a crisis and mutation. One of the symptoms of this crisis is the "waning of affect." Van Gogh's shoes represent the whole object world of agricultural misery, of stark rural poverty, and the whole rudimentary human world of backbreaking peasant toil." They remind Jameson of "the heavy tread of the peasant woman, the loneliness of the field path, the hut in the clearing, the worn and broken instruments of labor in the furrows and at the hearth." By contrast, Warhol's *Diamond Dust Shoes* is of a different order. The series "evidently no longer speaks to us with any of the immediacy of Van Gogh's footwear; indeed, I am tempted to say that it does not really speak to us at all. Instead they speak of the emergence of a new kind of flatness or depthlessness, a new kind of superficiality in the most literal sense." See Fredric Jameson *Postmodernism, Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1991, pp. 8-9.

8. Jameson, p. 18.

9. Leo Steinberg, "The Glorious Company," *Art about Art*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, July–September 1978, pp. 8-31.

appropriation into a signature element of their work. Furthermore, Mickey Mouse's painted arm and famous marker, which appear in three of Zuckerman's paintings, offer a soft critique concerning the commodification of the art world, since Mickey Mouse (associated with consumerism and capitalism) in this case "assists" the artist in producing a commodity whose value will likely increase significantly in the coming years. Additional elements—a Matisse cutout, a plant from a painting by Picasso, emoji droplets, and a frog – similarly appear as hyperlinks; as stamps confirming the act of appropriation.

#### A Cannibalism of Styles: The Act of Appropriation and the Question of Representation

The painting that best encapsulates the questions of representation and transformation with which Zuckerman is concerned is *Pygmalion and her Creation*. The original story of Pygmalion, as given expression in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, involves the act of creation itself as the transformation of a representation into a concrete, living entity. The torsos of the two large women sitting side by side as they face each other were taken from Rubens's *Jupiter and Callisto* (1613), whereas their lower bodies were appropriated from a different painting by Rubens. The left arm of the figure in the foreground comes from Picasso, as does the hat on her head. The scene is surrounded by Zuckerman's recurrent motifs, and crowned by a garland of flags from Google Images. What is remarkable about this painting is that, for the first time, the dimensions of the background figures (quoted from Cézanne's bathers) compete with those of the main figures, while the patches of color characteristically produced by Cézanne's brushwork carry over onto the Rubensian bodies, thus disrupting the stylistic differences between the two different historical periods. These bathers may be interpreted as witnesses for the central event depicted in the painting—that of one woman (the artist?) creating another woman (the appropriated artwork that has turned against its creator?). The facial expression of the woman on the left, which appears at once frightened and dumb, reflects Zuckerman's ironic stance and grotesque humor.

Much has been written about the differences between artistic influence and gestures of homage, and between practices of quotation and appropriation. The act of appropriation is based on the concept of reproduction; the quote is a copy of a specific "origin," which has been displaced to a different field. The quotation seems to import into this field the glimmer of the original work's aura, while mediating its presence in a new context; in contrast to the connotations of *influence* or *homage*, which involve a transformation of the original and its assimilation into a new artwork. Postmodern appropriation, which grew out of American pop art (following Dada and Duchamp), is characterized by self-referential exposure, humor, and the inclusion of the viewer, so that quotation marks are an inseparable part of the work, if only symbolically. In his famous text on postmodernism, Jameson defined it as "the cannibalization of all the styles of the past, the play of random stylistic allusion."<sup>8</sup> Indeed, this discourse has led to a significant number of court cases involving artistic theft or plagiarism as the phenomenon of quotation ran into the no-man's-land of intellectual property rights. As early as 1978, the exhibition *Art about Art* (Whitney Museum of American Art) explicitly engaged with the practice of appropriation. Writing in the exhibition catalogue, Leo Steinberg remarked that the parameter for ethical appropriation was the level of relevancy—meaning, if the artist changes the context and endows the quoted artwork with a new life ("actualizes its potentialities"), using it to say something new, then this is not plagiarism, and the act of appropriation is legitimate.<sup>9</sup>

Zuckerman may well be described as a cannibal of all the styles of the past. From the (all male) artists she quotes in this series—Bronzino, Michelangelo, Rubens, Rossetti, Matisse, Renoir, Van Gogh, Picasso, Stuart Davis, Henri Rousseau, Ingres, Roy Lichtenstein, Richard Prince, John Currin, and George Condo—the most prominent are Picasso and Lichtenstein, who are themselves known for their practices of quotation. Zuckerman's appropriations are thus quotations of a second or third order. In *The Queen*, for instance, the face of the deranged figure seems to have been taken from a parody on Picasso's Cubism, whereas the eyes, nose, and mouth were borrowed from earlier paintings by Zuckerman herself. The "queen" is holding Lichtenstein's bowl of goldfish, itself a quotation from Matisse that had already appeared in an earlier painting by Zuckerman. The stylized outfit with the puffed black sleeves and gold chain (enhanced by Google Images) were taken from Picasso, who was quoting Lucas Cranach the Younger (ca. 1515–1586). Like the other works in this series, the foreground features Cézanne's voluminous apples. The inflatable palm tree to the right, which was taken from Google Images, is another allusion to Jeff Koons. The abstract, boldly colored backdrop was taken from Stuart Davis, and blends harmoniously with the origami-like hat taken from Picasso. The realistically depicted hand holding a glass, which stands out in terms of its painterly style, was borrowed from another painting by Zuckerman. The parody on the endless possibilities of representation born of the recombination of historical styles appears here at its best.

The appropriations from Picasso and Lichtenstein are perhaps the most significant among Zuckerman's numerous appropriations, since they underscore the unique character of her engagement with this strategy. Beginning in the 1940s, Picasso turned to quoting Lucas Cranach the Younger, Rembrandt, Courbet, El Greco, Poussin, Giorgione, Velázquez, Manet, and Delacroix as part of his tireless investigation of art history, creating homages to works he considered to be masterpieces. Picasso's acts of appropriation were gestures of homage translated into his own unique language: he abstracted and flattened forms and transformed them into two-dimensional arrangements, while maintaining the original format and compositional frame. Several decades later, Lichtenstein, who also frequently appropriated works from art history (including ones by Mondrian, Matisse, and Van Gogh), quoted Picasso by similarly translating Picasso's earlier translations into his own language. Lichtenstein isolated fragments, enlarging them and abstracting them into their geometric forms, while preserving the formulas of Picasso, Mondrian, or Van Gogh's paintings. He continued on from the point at which Picasso had stopped: his translation of Picasso's language into his own still preserved the framework of a single work, while assimilating the quoted painting into his own painting. In Zuckerman's case, by contrast, collage-like principle and digital technology enable her to speak all languages at once, while simultaneously presenting numerous quotations from a range of sources.

### The Painterly Logic of Collage and the Legacy of Rauschenberg

Of all the artists engaged with strategies of quotation from the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century onwards, Robert Rauschenberg is perhaps the one closest to Zuckerman in terms of his sensibility, and it is no coincidence that he is one of her heroes. To begin with, he too felt a special affinity for Venus, the goddess of love and beauty (interpreted by some as a reflection of his own narcissistic figure). More importantly, however, his approach to collage and his introduction of reproductive techniques (silkscreens and transfer drawings) into his Combine paintings is a major precedent for Zuckerman's work. His multiplicity of images and angles, his narrative density, the multifaceted practice of quotation, and the absence of a hierarchy between images of historical



Pablo Picasso, *Portrait of a Woman after Cranach the Younger*, 1958, linocut on paper, 30 1/4 x 22 5/8 in. (76 x 57.5 cm) © 2017 Estate of Pablo Picasso / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

10. Leo Steinberg, *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth Century Art*, London, Oxford University Press, 1972, p. 84.

11. Rosalind Krauss, "Rauschenberg and the Materialized Image," *Artforum* Vol. 13, No. 4, Dec. 1974, pp. 43-46.

12. Malraux coined this term to refer to a meta-museum encompassing the totality of our cultural knowledge—a possibility born thanks to the medium of photography, which gave rise to the creation of reproductions. See André Malraux, *The Museum Without Walls*, New York: Doubleday, 1967.

13. Neuman, *ibid.*

14. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, London: Penguin Books 1972, Chapter 3.

masterpieces and familiar images such as the Statue of Liberty, comic strips, postcards, and newspaper images has undoubtedly served as a source of inspiration for Zuckerman.

The discourse about the critical shift from themes pertaining to "nature" to ones pertaining to "culture" in relation to Rauschenberg's work included the term *flatbed picture plane*. This term points to a revolutionary breakthrough in the process of Representation,<sup>10</sup> which transformed the picture plane into a "databank" or a "receptor surface" that associatively absorbed, embedded and assimilated images as a material substance with equal degree of density.<sup>11</sup> Written by Rosalind Krauss in 1974, this description appears to foresee the digital revolution that came about several decades later, providing artists like Zuckerman with such a wide range of possibilities. In her essay about the unique character of Rauschenberg's collages, Krauss defined the shift from an "object transformed" to an "object transferred" as one of the innovations in Rauschenberg's pictorial space: a "space of memory" characterized by the flow of images and their arrangement according to a process similar to a stream of consciousness. The silkscreens that Rauschenberg used to transfer photographs (a representation of a representation) to a flat support parallel the digital images found online and printed on Zuckerman's canvases. The painterly logic of the "museum without walls," as prophetically envisioned by André Malraux,<sup>12</sup> is equally relevant to both Rauschenberg and Zuckerman, for whom collage acts as the liberating agent freeing her of all hierarchical arrangements: "Artistically, I was fed up with arbitrary rules of what made art 'good' and acceptable to academic authority. Collaging was a form of catharsis, a reclamation and conquest of my past."<sup>13</sup>

### The Feminist Strategy of Appropriation: Negotiating Art History

In this series, Zuckerman not only joins a lineage of artists engaged in strategies of quotation, but more significantly, she joins a legacy of women artists whose works undermine conventional representations of the female figure in art history. From the 1970s to the 1990s, women artists (including Hannah Wilke, Cindy Sherman, Kiki Smith, Lisa Yuskavage, Jenny Saville, and others) turned to formulate an alternative language in order to address the distorted representation of women, by focusing on their own bodies as the arena for an identity struggle. John Berger's brilliant analysis of representations of the female nude (1972)—the largest iconographical category in Western art ever since the Renaissance—laid the groundwork for a feminist critique in this spirit. Berger's point of departure was that, in a world where "men act and women appear," women have been the object of the male gaze. The naked women in these paintings, an absent presence in Western culture, are usually passive rather than active—the objects of a gaze that is anything but innocent. Female nudes thus functioned for many centuries not only as a form of decoration and source of aesthetic pleasure, but also as objectified figures provoking the pleasures of ownership.<sup>14</sup> In other words, such representations in fact functioned as a form of pornography camouflaged by means of allegorical symbolism, while portraying the women in unnatural poses designed to display their bodies as fully as possible for the pleasure of the observing (male) artist/viewer. Disguised within their own naked bodies, the reclining women were characterized by the absence of a concrete presence and an incompatibility between their anatomy and physiognomy—lacking passion, desire, or a will of their own, as well as muscles, tendons, or pubic hair. Berger overturned the conservative art-historical distinction between the terms *naked* and *nude*—showing that what was considered to be a refined and cultivated "nude" with no erotic charge was in fact a form of pornography masquerading as an image of the sublime. Whereas, the rare instances in which the represented

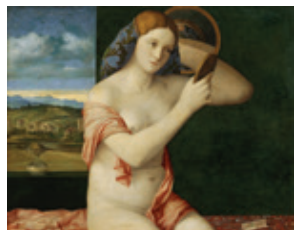
body was defined as "naked," and thus as a vulgar, pornographic representation (such as Manet's *Olympia*), were in fact authentic representations that transmitted an experience of actual, real femininity. To be naked, according to Berger, is to be oneself.

The series *Stranger in Paradise* may well be interpreted as a parody or subversive statement against the genre of reclining nudes. *Woman at her Toilette*—the third painting in this series—explicitly addresses the difference between a naked and a nude body, even if the depicted figure is not exactly reclining. The grotesque image of the young woman looking in the mirror, which is based on Bellini's *Young Woman at her Toilette* (1515), leaves no doubt concerning her nakedness: her body appears relatively homogenous in comparison to the female figures in other paintings in this series, yet her ridiculous face, her daft expression, and her single protruding breast confirm that her entire being undermines the conventional representations of nudity. Much like Cindy Sherman's series *Portraits from History* (1989–1990), here too extravagance, kinkiness, and seductiveness serve as subversive strategies that undermine the objectification of the female body. In this context, the act of gazing into a mirror has a symbolic charge: the mirror that was a symbol of vanity beginning with the medieval period and the Renaissance further reiterated the masculine gaze of the painter and viewer, representing forms of social surveillance and underscoring the passivity of women who had learned to internalize the male gaze.

The last painting in this series, *Serenade in the Courts*, completes Zuckerman's negotiation with art history: the face of the reclining nude, which was taken from Ingres's *Odalisque with a Slave* (1839), has been given contemporary features reminiscent of the artist's own face. Her left arm, which was originally stretched upwards, has been replaced by an awkward arm holding an apple from a painting by Rubens, which was already quoted in *Pygmalion and her Creation*. Ingres's idealized nude has been supplemented by a pair of flailing breasts, underarm hair, tendons, and visible veins on a leg clad in an old-fashioned sandal—a clearly ironic take on the category of nakedness. Two Disney figures from the film *Fantasia* offer a ridiculous rendition of the figures' gaping mouths and eyes. The woman playing music in Ingres's painting has been replaced by the figure from Rossetti's *A Christmas Carol* (1867), with facial features taken from earlier paintings by Zuckerman. In the foreground, a checkered black-and-white grid appears in the lower part of the composition (a cynical allusion to the modernist grid), topped by a quotation from Léger's *Three Women* (1921) in the upper background. The five women created by four male artists have been extricated by Zuckerman from the realm of the ideal and transported to the realm of the grotesque. In her own words, "The nudes were idealized and generic, perfect for visual consumption. My nudes make the viewer feel uncomfortable. My nudes stare back and challenge the viewer. Grotesque yet alluring, my nudes say, 'I'll consume you.'"<sup>15</sup>

### The Hyperbolic Version of Beauty: The Grotesque

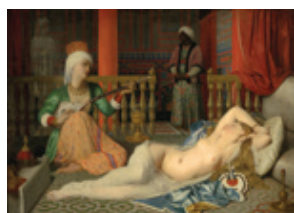
In transforming the ideal of the perfect and objectified female body into a grotesque body—extreme, distorted, ridiculous, and composed of incompatible body parts—Zuckerman defies conventions of beauty and representation. The hybrid bodies she composes combine representations of women by different artists from numerous periods, with almost every body part culled from a different source. The result of hundreds of years of oppression is thus what she calls a "hyperbolic version of beauty"—a manifestation of extravagance and theatricality that is aptly defined by the term *grotesque*. The grotesque is defined as "odd or unnatural in shape, appearance, or character; fantastically ugly or absurd; bizarre." Indeed, distortion



Giovanni Bellini, *Young Woman at Her Toilette*, 1515, oil on panel, 24 3/4 x 30 7/8 in. (62.9 x 78.3 cm) © Collection Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna



Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #216*, 1989, chromogenic color print, 8 3/8 x 56 1/8 in. (221.3 x 142.5 cm) © Cindy Sherman, courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures, New York



Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, *Odalisque with a Slave*, 1839-40, oil on canvas, 28 3/8 in x 39 1/2 in. (72.1 cm x 100.3 cm) © Collection Harvard Art Museum/ Fogg Museum, Cambridge



Dante Gabriel Rossetti, *A Christmas Carol*, 1867, oil on panel, 17 7/8 x 15 in. (45.5 x 38 cm) © Public Domain

15. Neuman, *ibid.*

16. Sara Cohen Shabot, *On the Grotesque Body: A Philosophical Inquiry on Bakhtin, Merleau-Ponty, and other Thinkers*, Tel Aviv: Resling, 2008, p. 60 [in Hebrew]. For an abstract of some of the major ideas presented in this book, see: Sara Cohen Shabot, "Notes on the Grotesque Body," in *Wild Exaggeration* (exh. cat.) Haifa Museum of Art, 2009, pp. 98-101.

17. Cohen Shabot, *ibid.*, p. 189.

and exaggeration are two of its fundamental principles, since they transform the subject into something else, shifting the unstable boundaries of the self and revealing the highly fluid, dynamic, and mutable nature of identity.

The extreme expression of these elements is embodied in monsters, which are characterized by a fluid identity that lacks clear boundaries; it is not foreign to us, but rather composed of familiar elements, thus appearing at once attractive, threatening, and repulsive. One of the most salient characteristics of the grotesque is that it is nourished by existing materials rather than imaginary ones, making use of a concrete reality. In Zuckerman's case, this reality is the history of art, internet culture, and, indeed, everything else: "Exaggeration means working with the extant, playing with it, using it, producing whatever one can out of it."<sup>16</sup>

In the context of the wide-ranging discourse concerning representations of the human body in contemporary art, the grotesque has a metaphorical meaning as a representative of the postmodern spirit. In her book *The Grotesque Body*, Sara Cohen Shabot argues that the grotesque is a "super-metaphor" encompassing additional metaphors. She argues that the grotesque is the distinct manifestation of an opposition to the idea of a single, unified whole that can be represented in a specifically defined way: "The grotesque expresses change, dynamism, the possibility of being several things at once. The realm of the grotesque encompasses multiplicity, hybridity, mixture, distortion, the chaotic connection of different worlds and entities, whose borders between which are blurred within the grotesque entity."<sup>17</sup> Indeed, the quality most characteristic of the grotesque, which is highly relevant to Zuckerman's works, is hybridity. Partaking of the inversion of the accepted order, as what was previously central becomes marginalized, the grotesque is characterized by the hybrid combination of disparate elements. This idea of hybridity, as it is encapsulated in *Stranger in Paradise*, reflects a distorted and chaotic world of excess, overturned hierarchies, and the constant interpenetration of various entities.

Translated by Talya Halkin

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