



TO BE BAD IS NOT TO BE GOOD: KATYA GROKHOVSKY'S PERFORMANCE ART

BY ALICIA ELER

This essay is published on the occasion of the ArtSlant Prize IX Winners Exhibition at SPRING/BREAK Art Show, March 6–12, 2018. Katya Grokhovsky is the ArtSlant Prize IX Third Prize winner.

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Somewhere along the way, we lost it. Maybe it was the election, which ended in a sociopath Twitter addict becoming our president, or perhaps it was the exhaustion that followed. Or maybe it's just dealing with the business of living. Sometimes it is hard to tell.

Artist Katya Grokhovsky has been through it, and she's come out the other side, but not in the way that you'd expect. Her discovery? A character she refers to as simply "Bad Woman," an awkward, clumsy entity who wears a leopard print fur coat, chunky white mask, blonde wig, pink tights, and sandals. She has a stuffed blue bird permanently affixed to her left shoulder. The only available documentation of this woman in the "wild" was shot by Grokhovsky, in her parent's backyard at home in Australia, where she grew up after emigrating from the Ukraine.

Katya Grokhovsky, *Bad Woman*, 2017, 13 min.

Bad Woman appears lost. She tries multiple times to get comfortable in a wooden chair, but never seems to succeed. Her shifty movements are endearing and sensitive. *Bad Woman* herself is equal parts enticing and grotesque—she tries at being appealing, but for whom it is unclear. At times, she perches on this chair, almost mirroring the position of the blue bird on her shoulder. Her face is this mask, her gait is clumsy and bizarre. Another time, she tries settling down on a blanket, but still, nothing seems to be the right position. She is confined by her female form, and she knows it. Her look is much like Tonya Harding's deranged mother, LaVona, as played by Allison Janney in the film *I, Tonya* (2017). Both "bad women" always wear a fur coat and have a bird perched on her shoulder. The main difference here is that LaVona's is alive while *Bad Woman*'s is a stuffed animal.



Katya Grokhovsky, *Bad Woman*, 2017, Acrylic, paper, rubber, wig

The term “bad woman” calls to mind more than a lost or socially rejected individual. There’s Roxanne Gay’s collection of essays *Bad Feminist*; there’s Donald Trump calling Hillary Clinton a “nasty woman” during the presidential debates, around the same time he bragged about “grabbing pussy” to TV personality Billy Bush of *Access Hollywood*. Then there was the Women’s March and pussy hats. I imagine Grokhovsky’s *Bad Woman* as a clairvoyant woman, someone who knew that this would all happen, who could’ve debunked the astrologers who wrongly predicted Hillary would win. It wasn’t in the stars or the cards or fate. *Bad Woman* knew that sexist American culture would prevail, and bad women would stay bad, perhaps getting even “worse.” In this way, she’s also literally “bad to the bone,” a badass woman but not in a cheesy “girl power” kinda way, the sort of #feminism that gives feminism a bad (as in, lame) name. Her disinterest in abiding to social norms is not a literal failure, but a performed one, and a rejection of all these social constructs. *Bad Woman* never does get comfortable in her domestic space, or in her own skin, and she doesn’t give a shit.

But she did not come out of thin air: *Bad Woman* was born out of a painterly revolt. Performance art came to Grokhovsky, who received her MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and trained as a painter, as a sort of rebellion. Yet, despite leaving the canvas behind for objects like the mask, the use of paint never left her practice. Indeed, she uses paint practically everywhere, liberally poured, or layered on with thickly laden strokes. The *Bad Woman*’s clown-like mask is also heavily painted, with a type of viscosity to it. Influenced by artists such as Mike Kelley, Carolee Schneeman and Louise Bourgeois, Grokhovsky is naturally drawn to artists whose work combines performance, video, and objects.

Katya Grokhovsky, *Bad Bunny*, 2017, 3 min.

Which leads me away from *Bad Woman* and toward the giant bunny costume Grokhovsky uses in *Bad Bunny* (2017), filmed at the Wassaic Project Artist Residency, in a rural location, without the sounds of Australian birds in the background. Here the artist dresses in a bunny costume, wearing a bulbous green mask. With the camera at a fixed angle, she hops through a hula hoop, hangs in a tire swing, and generally wanders around, somewhat aimlessly. Without the constraints of gender, the rabbit does whatever it wants, not attempting to appear appealing for anyone else. At a certain point, the video slows down, capturing a slow motion roll of the bunny hula hooping. Hippity hoppity hop.

The bunny costume may be a return to childhood, a freedom of sorts, but it is also the Playboy bunny, a symbol of hypersexualization. I don't think Grokhovsky was going for the latter, but the reference is impossible to avoid, even though much of her project is about deconditioning social norms.



Katya Grokhovsky, *Bad Bunny*, 2017, Video still

It is for that reason I found myself perplexed and transfixed by *Bad Woman*. More than just an embodiment of the grotesque, she is this absurdist, bizarro individual, too eccentric for this world yet at the same time, accepting that yes, she is a part of it. Her path is unclear. But she will persist—not in the way of “nevertheless, she persisted,” another feminist refrain, coined in response to Senator Elizabeth Warren’s actions on the senate floor: she continued speaking after the U.S. Senate tried to silence her objections to confirming Jeff Sessions as U.S. Attorney General. No. No. No! This *Bad Woman* is not playing into this game. She’s not on a senate floor or encircled by people attempting to take selfies with her. Instead, she’s unraveling the inner workings of it, ever so slowly, on her own, in her world, without interruption.

Alicia Eler is the author of The Selfie Generation: How Our Self Images Are Changing Our Notions of Privacy, Sex, Consent, and Culture (Skyhorse). She is the visual art critic/arts reporter at the Minneapolis Star Tribune, and is also published in New York Magazine, Harper's Bazaar, Guardian, New Inquiry, GLAMOUR, Aperture, Art21 Magazine, and many others.

(Image at top: Katya Grokhovsky, *Bad Woman*, 2017, Video still. All images: Courtesy of the artist)

Posted by Alicia Eler on 3/5/18

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