

A Conversation with Amalia Ulman

Los Angeles is a mecca of middlebrow consumerism: Airbnb, Starbucks, fitness fads, Groupon spa deals, pet parlours and diets of the week. Holiday discounts on breast enhancements air on the radio; Botox coupons can be cut out of the back of the *LA Weekly*.

Amalia Ulman studied in London but now works out of her office in Downtown L.A. Her materials are the language, codes, and conduits (visual, textual, invisible) inscribed in the propaganda of current consumer culture. Our reactions to her works are the same contradictory feelings we get from consuming. We pick things off the store shelf that are pretty, clean, and neatly packaged—artisan soap, organic coffee beans—but we're repulsed when confronted with the violence of the system that produces them. In some works Ulman presents this hypocrisy in literal forms: twee, heart-shaped products stained with blood. In others, the message is played out more subtly: an installation of a corporate office space spliced with words taken from Zen philosophy.

Ulman is very good at emulating the cozy comfort of little indulgences. In *Excellences & Perfections*, a project that still populates her Instagram account @amaliaulman, she plays the role of a socialite who gets Botox and then a boob job. (The boob job was faked, but Ulman did get botox, an action that recalls Orland's work with body modification). Ulman's was a fiction so authentic that it gamed the Internet, until the ruse was revealed—it was a piece that captivated a much wider audience than the usual art crowd, and remains perhaps her best known work.

In Ulman's work, something unsettling eventually emanates from perfect taste. *Excellences & Perfections* turned into the chronicle of a young girl's meltdown. Ulman's creations are always ambivalent: part sympathetic, part victims of a collective social order that evaluates and judges with a scrolling thumb.

Char Jansen: Your work deals so much with consumerism, and the physical and emotional pain it can inflict. L.A. is often portrayed as the pinnacle of Western consumerist ideals. Is that reputation something that you've found to be true, or apocryphal since you moved here?

Amalia Ulman: Primarily, I moved to Los Angeles for very basic physical reasons. I suffer from depression and sunny weather helps. Also, after many surgeries, dry weather's a preference. In places like London or Asturias, my chronic pain gets to its worst levels. On the other hand, Los Angeles is a very interesting place in relation to my work. I'm interested in how people present themselves to others. I'm fascinated by people who edit their own life stories, and that's a very Hollywood thing to do.

I don't think L.A. has necessarily shaped my work, it is just there in the background because here's where I live. As any immigrant I bring my own world with me. But I've had very intense revealing and beautiful experiences in Los Angeles, like driving all the way down Santa Monica Boulevard from east to west, seeing the changes in class as you drive towards Beverly Hills. Or seeing the most depressing characters shopping for luxury goods at Neiman Marcus.

CJ: When you say “depressing,” it makes me curious as to how you really feel about consumerism. At your recent *International House of Cozy* exhibition in Rotterdam, for example, you highlighted

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the emotional contradictions of consuming, the compulsion and subsequent revulsion.

AU: Consumerism is like drinking. If you don't do it often you just get drunk and have a good time. If you do it all the time you just start feeling shitty. I don't think that anyone who has experienced love—physical love, religious love, fraternal love—can say that consuming objects is the best and healthiest thing in the world. We all know it's not really that necessary, but we all still do it. It is not only about buying a pair of shoes, but about driving nowhere, or walking around at night on a lit-up street, or taking a bath. Those are pleasurable things that are unnecessary and consume resources. I'm interested in that contradictory behavior that defines humanity.

CJ: You seem to pick up on self-indulgence a lot, the sensual comfort of

objects. It comes through particularly strongly and humorously in your video piece, *International House of Cozy*.

AU: Yes, exactly. *International House Of Cozy* was a pornographic video based on an infomercial that a famous blogger did for Zara. It is a short film where two porn actors role-play hipster aesthetics, using the language of porn as a legitimizing tool for explaining the transition from indie to mainstream and from mainstream to corporate—to ultimately become an invisible template.

Amalia Ulman is an airport based artist with an office in Downtown L.A. Born in Argentina but raised in Spain, she studied Fine Arts at Central Saint Martins in London. Recent solo shows and projects include *International House of Cozy*, MAMA, Rotterdam (2015); *Stock Images of War*, James Fuentes, New York (2014); *The Destruction Of Experience*, Evelyn Yard, London (2014); and *Excellences & Perfections*, a performance in social media that has been archived by *Rhizome* and the New Museum, New York.

Amalia Ulman



CJ: Ha! I really like how you bring out gesture in your work in that way, to show the proximity of congruous and incongruous language and behavior that is shaped by different contexts and environments. Based on what I've ascertained from our exchanges up to now, you're very concerned with these latent inequalities in the neoliberal system. Whether that's in the effect of the beauty industry on individual women or political propaganda on whole societies.

AU: Any system that runs solely on meritocracy leaves people behind. That's why I personally believe that it is important for the state to take care of basic things like housing, medical care, and a minimum wage. It is not fair to leave people behind because of a disability, or because a sudden illness, or even because of not being a workaholic overachiever. The system is shaped in a linear manner and human beings don't function in that way.

CJ: You grew up in a tattoo shop, and you've experienced poverty personally. I was curious as to whether your success now has changed you. I read a tweet you wrote about having your own Soho House card, as a small triumph over the "art bros." How do you feel in an art world that is full of privileged, upper-class people?

AU: Yes, my upbringing, for many different reasons, provided me with the perspective of being an outsider almost 100 percent of the time. I don't think there was one moment in my life when I felt like a part of something, I've always seen things from the outside.

I don't think having a Soho House card is a sign of success, and I feel fine with the upper class

because I don't really value money that much and I'm not a fan girl. I like people's humor, that's what I fall in love with. I actually feel embarrassed that I participate in a system where I materialize my thoughts into objects to be exhibited. Most of my favorite people, the most brilliant minds I've met, don't have a CV.

CJ: You've said that you don't feel successful, but more like your life is a "string of funny tragedies." Success in the capitalist sense often seems ominous, threatening, in your work...

AU: I feel blessed on a daily basis, and sometimes I'm overwhelmed by the fact that I'm able to rent a beautiful apartment, and an office, and a car. Or that I can order a book and get it delivered to my house in 24 hours. It feels like a fairy tale. Is it sustainable? It doesn't feel like it. Mainly because I'm not part of a stable system: firstly because I'm an artist and I rely on one of the weirdest economies there is, and secondly because I currently reside in the U.S., the capitalist potency par excellence. Easy come, easy go.

1

Amalia Ulman, *The Importance Of The Nest* (detail) (2014). Curtain, laser cut vinyl, thread, 80 x 72 inches. Image courtesy of the artist and Smart Objects.

2

Amalia Ulman, *Baby Footprints Crow's Feet* (installation view) (2014). Image courtesy of the artist and Ellis King, Dublin. Photo: Alastair Smeaton, Dublin.

3

Amalia Ulman, *International House of Cozy* (installation view) (2014). Image courtesy of the artist and Showroom MAMA, Rotterdam.