

NATHALIE KARG

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Elsa Sahal, *Harlequins and Bathers*

May 3 - June 16, 2019

Opening Reception: Friday, May 3rd, 6–8 pm

In her first New York solo show, French ceramicist Elsa Sahal presents a motley crew of strange and sexy clay creatures loosely inspired by Picasso's paintings of bathers and harlequins. Blurring the line between abstraction and figuration, Sahal's sculptures are amorphous, yet undeniably corporeal. Body fragments including legs, breasts, vulvae, phalluses and buttocks emerge from otherwise lumpen forms. Misplaced humanoid features are alternately undermined and accentuated by Sahal's artful glazing technique—whereby drips, smears and sheens read both as painterly gestures and various bodily secretions.

Like Picasso, Sahal depicts the body from multiple angles at once. Without a clear frontal view, her shapeshifting sculptures morph into and out of recognizable anatomies according to the viewer's changing perspective. Five recent additions to Sahal's on-going "Harlequins" series which the artist began during a residency at Alfred University in 2009, reimagine one of Picasso's most iconic subjects. Decorated with tell-tale colorful diamond patterns, Sahal's thick-legged entertainers are fragmented and distorted. They are also full of grace, movement, and personality.

Evoking traditional clown make-up, *Clownesses*, 2019, is a sinewy kabuki-white form adorned with numerous dribbling crimson-red balls. The scatological impression of bleeding clown noses is more tragic than comic. Rather than goofy, Sahal's clownesses are gory. Three "Leda" sculptures (all 2015) suspended from the ceiling suggest contortionist trapeze artists. With long swan-like necks that burrow into themselves, the pale avian creatures appear to be pruning (or otherwise pleasuring) themselves. Like Picasso's nude bathers, Sahal's flying acrobats appear athletic, sensual, and impossible. Finally, two "Slippery Fairies," 2018, round out Sahal's circus troupe. With six tentacle-like legs each and a disarming bubble-gum pink hide this duo is adorably abject—a contradiction in terms that aptly describes Sahal's oeuvre as a whole.

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Elsa Sahal (born in 1975, Paris, France) is a Paris-based sculptor known for biomorphic ceramic works that upend notions of the masculine and feminine, the erotic and abject, and the representational and abstract. She received her training at the National School of Fine Arts, Paris in 2000. She is the recipient of numerous awards and residencies, including the Georges Coulon Prize for Sculpture, awarded by the Institute de France (2013) and the National Manufactory of Sèvres (2007-08). She has taught at the National School of ENSAV, Versailles, the School of Decorative Arts of Strasbourg, and Alfred University. Sahal has also shown extensively both nationally and internationally, including at the Museum of Art and Design, New York (2013), the National Museum of Women in the arts, Washington DC (2018) the Bonnenfantenmuseum (2016), Maastricht and the Monnaie de Paris (2017).

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