

## DIANE ROSENSTEIN GALLERY

Ilona Szwarc: *Virgin Soap*  
September 4 – October 9, 2021

Opening reception: Saturday, September 4<sup>th</sup> from 6:00 – 8:00 pm

Diane Rosenstein Gallery is pleased to announce *Virgin Soap* — a solo exhibition of photographs and sculpture by Ilona Szwarc. In this new body of work, the Polish American artist documents herself casting a model's torso in silicone and plaster. The model lies prone on a table, her breasts exposed, classically posed against an electric blue backdrop. A perverse tutorial proceeds: Szwarc stands behind the model, a presence at once intimate and coercive. The artist binds her subject's breasts with laces to measure them, then covers the model's breasts, shoulders, and mouth in green silicone.

The title of *Virgin Soap* is drawn from Charles Simic's poem, "Breasts", a devotional in which the poet declares breasts to be "foam on which our hands are cleansed." In Szwarc's work, this metaphoric cleansing is both transformational and restrictive: While physically restrained by the plaster, the model challenges the camera with her gaze. Szwarc leaves her to dry. When the rest of the room is cleared, the cast torso remains on the table, surgically pale.

With *Virgin Soap*, Szwarc draws on her ongoing fascination with doppelgängers. The model depicted in these photographs and sculpture could be the artist's sister; they share such an uncanny resemblance. The model -- Talia Shvedova, a Russian immigrant whose experience and appearance present an imperfect double of the artist's own -- is the false subject of Szwarc's own self-portrait.

In casting the model's breasts, Szwarc collaborates with her subject to produce yet a third doppelgänger, a sculptural torso that remains after both women have left the frame. *Virgin Soap* invokes a curious trinity. Two twinned women observe and are observed, are bound by the frame of the photograph and within the drying plaster. This binding process creates a third, abject body. Between all the looking and posing and waiting, the women have shed something -- an object borne of the process of objectification. The faceless cast remains, a fragment somehow more feminine than artist or subject.

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Szwarc's photographic work is concerned with rendering her experience visible in a way impossible in language. In *Virgin Soap*, there's something melancholic about that process. Szwarc plays Pygmalion, unsure where the boundary lies between the real and the fake.

But the perfect sculpture she creates is only a fragment. In a companion series of images, Szwarc abstracts the raw materials of the casting process, crafting formal still lifes that play with the poetics of silicone and fiberglass. Likewise, a couplet of panoramic tableaus offers an elliptical glance at Szwarc's process, a view of a world at once decorative and dangerous.

As a female artist with a focus on self-portraiture, Szwarc plays the voyeur of her own experience. As an immigrant to the United States whose identity was reformed around another language and home, Szwarc is familiar with what it means to observe oneself; to see oneself clearly through gaps produced by an unfamiliar familiarity. Szwarc is cognizant of the power dynamics inherent in this process. Like the plaster torso cast in *Virgin Soap*, Szwarc's photographs are a kind of third body, an object shed in the irreconcilable moments of womanhood and an immigrant experience.

**Ilona Szwarc** (b. 1984) is an artist who works in photography, sculpture, and performance. She received an MFA in Photography from Yale University and a BFA from the School of Visual Arts in NYC. She explores themes of identity, transformation, and the doppelgänger - an inquiry rooted in her immigrant experience. Recent solo exhibitions include *Make Room* (2019) and *AALA Gallery* (2018) in Los Angeles; and *Fort Institute of Photography, Warsaw* (2017). Recently, her work was included in group shows at *Nathalie Karg Gallery, New York City*; and *Nicodim Gallery, Regen Projects, Diane Rosenstein, and Shulamit Nazarian Gallery* in Los Angeles. Born in Warsaw, Poland, she now lives and works in Los Angeles.