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ILONA SZWARC | 'VIRGIN SOAP' AT DIANE ROSENSTEIN GALLERY

BY NATE RYNASKI

Polish-born, Los Angeles-based artist [Ilona Szwarz](#)'s *Virgin Soap* is on view through October 16 at [Diane Rosenstein Gallery](#) in Los Angeles. Working in photography, sculpture, and performance, Szwarz's works engage with an unconventional self-portraiture, as exemplified in *Virgin Soap*, as well as previous works *Unsex me here* and *Some women can take their eyes out*. In *Unsex me here*, her doppelgänger goes through a dramatic, anthropomorphic transformation. In *Some women can take their eyes out*, Szwarz photographs her reflections in models' bloodshot eyes as a tear builds along their waterlines.

There is something to be said about the *gaze*. Is this the female gaze? The artist as the subject? A resistance within a medium classically dominated by men and their perceptions? It could be all of those, but in *Virgin Soap*, it's something more direct, more demanding of the viewer, more tense.

In *Virgin Soap*, Szwarz plays a menacing role. Casting her model, Talia Shvedova, in silicone and plaster, creating a mold of her bare torso, Szwarz engages in an intimately violent tutorial. Photographs "document" this process of creating this sculpture from beginning to end—hands hold the body as if to protect it in this plaster armor, while knives and rope restrict and mutilate it. And the tension persists as Szwarz peers from behind her model, hands binding her chest and eyes following the viewer as if to direct their own eyes.

Flaunt caught up with Szwarz after taking a stroll through *Virgin Soap* to talk about assimilation, heritage, world building, and more.

When I first started doing casting calls for women who look like me, I specifically sought out women born in the US. I was interested in the way identity and appearance are connected and not connected. I wanted to bring out the familiarity and foreignness at the same time. Also, I wanted to wield a certain sort of power in transforming these American models. As an immigrant, I wanted to reverse my cultural assimilation onto these women.

I invited Talia to the project as she is someone I relate to a lot, having immigrated from the same part of the world, and now living in Los Angeles. Our experiences as women and immigrants are shared, but different. Yet we still might be mistaken for the same kind of person, the same kind of immigrant, the same type of woman.

To the tune of the model, *Virgin Soap* so intimately interacts with her and her body, through the process of creating the mold, but then also through the painting of the sculpture to create an uncanny representation of her torso. Might this speak to something beyond the observation of self, but more of a molding of the self?

The work, in which I show all the process, is very much about the molding of the self. It is also about all the transformations, internal and external, that a person might lead themselves through—whether to belong, assimilate, or otherwise blend in. In that way, it directly speaks to my experience—the many transformations I led myself through, often unnoticed until years later. Having lived through several identity crises, occasioned by immigration and displacement, I am tirelessly, consciously, and subconsciously readjusting and composing myself. I am always switching between different expressions and personalities depending on what language I am speaking, never arriving at a fixed identity. The images are about the process of becoming. It is important to me that the viewer stays with the work, and observes the small details as they change from one photograph to the next. Whether those are small shifts in Talia's gaze or the placement of my hands working on the mold. But the work is also an abstract experiment in reproduction.

Your Polish heritage is intrinsic to your work, whether seen or not. How do you feel it is represented in *Virgin Soap*?

In *Virgin Soap*, I haven't specifically placed any objects that I brought back from Poland, but the sensibility seeps through. As much as this body of work is personal, it also is about the artist's studio and the artistic process, and about making connections to the history of art. My initial interest in making my own patterns and wallpapers came from the interior spaces I remember from growing up in Warsaw. But perhaps most evidently my Polish heritage is revealed in the more abstracted images of the materials. I see the traces of Catholic imagery in the closeup of the blue silicone drips on the fiberglass mother mold (*If I am a breast I would make milk*), and in the photographs picturing the inside of the blue silicone mold (*The sleep I slept within a nightmare itself*).

You have not only an intimate presence, but also a menacing, sometimes violent presence in these works—binding the subject, carving the sculpture, etcetera. What was it that you were considering with that tension?

In my work, I start out structuring the series as a tutorial, of sorts. I am interested in instructional imagery and the how-to aesthetics, and therefore also in the role of the expert. I think there is inherent violence in any transformation a person experiences, whether it's the transformation is self-inflicted or forced from the outside, be it by environment, society, displacement, or another person.

There's a theatricality to your work. One of your recent works, *Unsex me here*, draws from Shakespeare's *Lady MacBeth*. What is it that draws you to theater/theatricality? How do you feel it bolsters the themes/ideas you work with?

I am interested in both theater and film and specifically in the artifice behind it. I love the production value of sets, and the world building that's involved. In my own way, I do that in my work, but I am also interested in presenting the behind the scenes. The work is highly staged and dramatized, but ultimately it is about the artistic process. The careful staging however lets me focus in on the psychology of the characters that Talia and I embody.