



CLEARING

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# MOUSSE

## CONVERSATION

# Comfort is Tricky: Marina Pinsky and Buck Ellison

**The Russian-born artist Marina Pinsky (b. 1986) talks with Californian Buck Ellison (b. 1987) about their respective work practices, the overabundance of image production in the world, and the meaning of “political art.”**

Buck Ellison: I was at a dinner the other day and the group got to talking about your work. Someone said, “Marina makes the sculptures that a sculptor would never allow themselves to make.” I didn’t understand that, so I wanted to ask you about it.

Marina Pinsky: Haha, I don’t understand it so well, either! But I suppose it must have something to do with the way I use images. Once I was talking with a sculptor friend of mine, and he said something along the lines of that sculptors generally work from the structure outward, and the imagery comes last, maybe as a sort of coating. But I often start with the imagery and build a structure to support it, to bring a picture more fully into someone’s experience. In your photos, I’m always struck by the invisible rapport between you and the people you’re with. I’m always seeing you behind the camera there in the same room, which in general I feel so rarely in most photos. Or am I way off base, and the images are produced like commercial photos with models, rented locations, stylists, et cetera?

BE: I borrow a lot from the model of a commercial photo shoot — styling clothing, finding props, scouting locations. I cast the models from amateur agencies; I don’t want my audience to know the model personally, as this would disrupt their viewing of the image. I’m not so much interested in the subjectivity of the models as I am in the behaviors they depict.

MP: Did you work on commercial photo shoots before?

BE: When I was in college I assisted on a few commercial photo shoots. It was exciting to see that amount of manpower go into the making of a single image. The idea of twenty people working for weeks to produce a photo of a Boston terrier in a stroller, for example, is very beautiful to me.

MP: Is that where you learned the method you use to make photos now?

BE: To shoot them, yes, but then I bring them into the studio to edit. So it shifts from a very collaborative shooting process — working with printers, models, prop houses — to

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a very hermetic editing process. I need time to feel comfortable exhibiting a photograph, which is pretty at odds with the way a commercial photo is produced and disseminated. What's your editing process like?

MP: Nowadays I usually work with a show in mind, thinking of how the works will function in a particular space from the start.

BE: Ah, and for me it's the opposite! The frame is like its own little exhibition in and of itself, so for me it's exciting to combine works again and again in new contexts. The show you saw in Paris, for example, had works from 2008 up to 2016.

MP: For my last solo show, there were a few main ingredients, but the starting point was actually some photos I had taken the summer before on Belgian National Day, of a female police officer fingerprinting a young boy as a public display. The whole situation I was seeing in front of me was very strange, slightly disturbing, but also quite funny. For the next few months I thought about these pictures. Then the attacks in Paris happened. Brussels was on high alert for months, with the entire city being preemptively shut down several times through the winter. Meanwhile, I was editing these photos, and working on all the other parts of the show, in the climate of fear and paranoia so palpable then. Then in March the attacks in Brussels happened. The exhibition was only a few weeks later, and I was very concerned about whether to show any of these things I was making, which carried this tension within them, but also had a particular type of Belgian absurdity, which after two years I had finally gotten a feeling for.

BE: Then you have to show them. I like those pictures, being of course about photography as a medium, but not in an annoying way, but also having a political valence. I admire that about your work — there is backstory, but it never eclipses my viewing of the work. I can stand in front of the fingerprint photos and enjoy them without knowing anything.

MP: What gets you to the point of feeling comfortable showing a work?

BE: Comfort is tricky. I use time as a test against myself on both ends of making an image. If I have an idea and I'm still thinking about it two years later, then it feels vetted and I go and shoot it. Then I have the image. I'll hang it up and store it away and repeat this process for a few months. If it still delights and surprises me after a year or two, it's ready.

MP: Is it really just the time to get used to it, or have there been moments where you had a strong ambivalence that you had to resolve suddenly?

BE: I read recently that a billion images are made every day. I don't know how to say this without sounding very serious, but I feel a big responsibility, if I am going to add another image to this pile, to at least make it a good one. All that being said, and this returns to your fingerprint photograph in a way, I have, and I think a lot of artists have, been feeling different about producing works in the last few months. I'm more convinced than ever about the political potential of art. On the other hand, the day-to-day of the studio, the writing emails or discussing which work should go to an art fair, feels perverse against this current political backdrop. How do you feel about this?

MP: I agree with you, but I think the business side of art has always been perverse! So many of the people involved in the international art trade don't share egalitarian political values, and didn't before this election. But now of course everything is coming to the

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forefront; the United States' political backdrop is now its closing curtain. But I can say in the last few months it's been pretty heartening seeing art institutions that normally take an officially neutral stance, like the MoMA, showing strong political positions.

BE: Are you making work right now? I was never a fan of overtly political art; my favorite pieces are the ones where political potential hits you more obliquely (but just as hard). That's what I always strove for with my work, but now I'm not sure that's still the "appropriate" tactic. How do you feel?

MP: Most of my favorite artists in that regard never intended to make "political art," but their artworks became politicized because of the climate those works entered into. For example, the filmmaker Sergei Parajanov made strong, empathic, delicate images of singular truth and beauty. He was imprisoned multiple times for what the Soviet regime called "propagation of pornography." In the present climate, I don't think artists should change the content of their work as a result of regime change. In general I'm not so into tactical maneuvers. I see the problem on the reception level — that the channels for promoting art could denature the complexity of artworks, corrupt them as they enter the world, if they were to adapt to a cultural field restricted by the political tide. So far the opposite is happening, and that makes me really happy — that a lot of people involved in art are stepping up to make visible the populations and struggles that the neofascist right wing want to disappear.