

Kayne Griffin Corcoran



Getting Erotic with Aïda Ruilova

With her new solo exhibition at New York's Marlborough Gallery, the artist seduces with vintage erotica — just not in the way you'd expect.



Aïda Ruilova in front of *Immoral Tales*, 2014. Courtesy Marlborough Chelsea.

The day before her solo exhibition, "The Pink Palace," opened on Thursday, the artist Aïda Ruilova was tucked away deep in New York's Marlborough Chelsea gallery, sitting on the concrete floor of the show's final room. A persistent whir came from the fan powering the giant inflatable heart behind her; louder still was the rhythmic breathing echoing off the walls as a suggestive, super-sized projection of a woman's mouth looped in the background.

The 44-second sequence playing was, in fact, a recreation of a scene from *Immoral Tales*, the 1974 erotic film by Walerian Borowczyk that's long fascinated Ruilova. In addition to her 2013 show "I'm So Wild About Your Strawberry Mouth," it also inspired her 2010 short, *Goner*, a violent play on horror films starring the actress Sonja Kinski. The lips in this show again belong to Kinski, in large part because they closely resemble the set in *Immoral Tales*. (She is, after all, the daughter of the film's star, Natassja Kinski.)

Ruilova, who is married to the artist Raymond Pettibon, discovered '60s and '70s erotica when she came across stills from the films of Jean Rollin, a French filmmaker who'd been mixing horror with erotica since the '50s. The two exchanged letters for seven or eight years, and finally met in the early 2000s to make a film called *Life Like*, where Rollin played his own corpse. "I think meeting him drew me into learning a lot more about films made then, and starting to collect ephemera related to their imagery," Ruilova said.



Pleasure Seeking Nurses, 2015
Paper and velvet, 63 x 47 in. Photo courtesy of Marlborough Chelsea.

The explicit and often violent nature of the images rarely unsettles her: "I think I'm always examining it," she said. "In real life, it's never as terrible as it is when it's visually represented in a film."

That's something Ruilova got to know firsthand early on: "My father was a surgeon, so I used to go watch surgery," she said. "There's a story he used to tell about me: Once, he took me to the emergency room because there was a man with a gunshot wound in his head. I was like, 'I want to see, I want to see.' He was like, 'No no no, sit here and stay with the nurse.' I snuck in and looked, and I was unimpressed – I think I said, 'Oh, it doesn't look as bad as I thought it would.' And so I think that's what was so disappointing to me – it didn't look as extreme as in the movies, but it was more real."

Ruilova remembers, too, when he started to use laparoscopy, showing operations on a monitor with a camera that lit up the patient's rosy insides. The show's title, "The Pink Palace," is partly a reference to that – as well as to the infamous '50s home of former Playboy Playmate Jayne Mansfield. From the walls to the shag carpets, everything inside was pink, and Mansfield's bodybuilder husband helped build a heart-shaped pool and fireplace. "It was kind of the most vulgar representation of the female body," Ruilova said.

All that was pink in Marlborough Chelsea, though, was the projection of Kinski's lips. The walls were white, and adorned with examples from Ruilova's vast collection of vintage erotica posters, which she cut into with stencils and backed with black velvet. To emphasize their delicateness, Ruilova left the pieces unframed.



Rocky, 2016. Vinyl, fan and hardware, edition 1/3. Photo courtesy of Marlborough Chelsea.

The show's giant inflatable heart also serves this ephemerality. "If you stick a pin in it, it's going to pop any second. It's all about air and breath, like the mouth in the film," she said. Its shape came from a film poster, though not a particularly erotic one: the image of two boxing gloves joined to form a heart is from *Rocky*.

"It's less about the films, and more about violence and the body and death," she said. "Death has always been a part of my work. We're all in denial of where we're going. We just have this body and we're like ephemera ourselves – we're rotting."

Death was even more prominently on her mind, though, in 2014, when she shot the film at the show's center just a month after her father died. Still, she said, the show isn't about his death, per se – the shoot had already been in the works. But does think it contributed to the delicacy of the work.

"This show is like walking a tightrope," she said. "Those collages feel like they could fall apart really easily. Somebody could just put a pin in that inflatable and it would just collapse. And the mouth is all breath. And it's maybe a bit more seductive."

—Stephanie Eckardt