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*miso*

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*Ro Elfberg met up with Australian artist Miso at the London launch night of her book Street/Studio for a chat, to prove exactly why she deserved to have her first collaborative book published at just 21... and why swimming pools go hand in hand with street art these days. She is one of the most revered street artists in Melbourne, famed for her ability to breath new life into the streets using century-old folklore, whilst simultaneously bringing something fresh to the scene. A young artist who's been on our radar a while, we were eager to hear what she had to say.*

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*Judging by your pieces on display in 'Black Rat' last night, it seems that your art is inspired quite heavily by folklore and preserving things which might otherwise be forgotten. What is it about stories that you're so interested in and where did your desire to keep them alive come from?*

Well I really like the idea that Nietzsche had about the way we make sense of the world around us through mythology, by making myths and stories and putting more complex ideas into an allegory or fable. Highlighting small instances that are parts of bigger ideas. However on the most basic level it's about making things that are sincere and come from a human place. Just drawing on what I know – portraits of friends, strangers, gestures, experiences, cities, things like that.

*Do you think you've been successful so far in doing so?*

I hope so!

*A number of your street art pieces serve to rejuvenate the streets and frame things that would normally be overlooked. How closely does this relate to the idea of Russian Constructivism – i.e. art not for art's sake?*

That's a really interesting question! With Russian Constructivism it's all about having a practical impact; because they were making things after the 1917 Revolution, they were trying to change the way people related to the new society around them through architecture, as well as the way they related to their body through the clothes that they made, or the



objects they used, or posters they saw. So with street art, it's that ability to have a direct impact on the way people look at their city and relate to their surroundings. It can be quite incredible how relatively small pieces of art or something quite simple just made out of paper and glue can actually change the way you might look at an interior or the potential of a space, or change the way you see your city. It's a really powerful thing.

***Was Constructivism something you thought about quite a lot when you composed your installation about the Ukraine?***

I think so – but at the same time, my work doesn't look like Constructivist art. When I was making that show my main fear was of making something insincere and because it was my first big installation work, I decided to make it about what I know best; and so I built my home town where I grew up! That's what I really love about Constructivism more than anything else – it was so sincere and optimistic. But the show was also about the nature of cities and the way we orientate, construct and remember them. It's silly, but the show actually came about because I swim a lot and that's when I really think about everything; so my whole idea up until that point was to build a city under water and have people swim and wade through my exhibition. I was always really confused about how I would do that and who would give me a pool, and then I realised I could just lift it out of the water! So that's what I ended up making, although I was actually thinking about an underwater city the whole time.

***That would have been amazing, handing out snorkels and goggles to art lovers.***

Exactly! I need someone to lend me their pool. The idea was that it would be in summer and I'd make watertight frames and have heaps of seaweed and debris for people to swim through and explore.

***That sounds like a fantastic plan. So are any of your pieces 'art for art's sake' or does everything have a purpose?***

There's such a fine line defining those things. Ultimately they are just posters stuck on a wall; they don't have political slogans, they aren't trying to sell anything nor do they have an agenda of any kind. In that way, I don't think I make art for a distinct purpose at all.

***So you wouldn't say you are trying to make a social or political statement with any of your work?***

I am, but it depends how you read it. There are obvious tangents, but I like to think that I leave the details a bit more open ended. I like the idea of taking people out of the streets, drawing them and then putting them back onto the streets; almost reflecting the city onto the city again. Whether those are portraits of friends or family, or more reactionary pieces about women or wider issues, they're definitely strong social or political statements – but it feels important to leave the details a lot more open, and not dictate too much.

***Is there still a lot of negativity about street art in Melbourne or is it quite widely accepted?***

As a city, it's pretty amazing to live in. On the whole, everyone is very much into street art; incredible amounts of people are shooting it and documenting it, coming to shows and talks, writing about it. But at the same time, the city keeps imposing harsher and harsher repercussions, which is completely contradicted by the fact that they feature street art and lanes in all the tourism advertising. But at the end of the day, there's a really supportive and amazing community of artists, and so many good things going on, that the rest is not very important.

***Coming to London and travelling to other places, do you see a lot of variation in the art and responses to it depending on the varied influences people have around them?***

It's so interesting seeing how a city's architecture shapes the work that is put back onto the streets. In London and New York, there's so much dark



brick and quite small walls in more prominent streets, so there are so many more bright stencils and posters on a small scale. Cities like Berlin, Barcelona, or Paris and Melbourne seem to get around that a bit more. There are more open walls, maybe more of a variety of surfaces. But at the same time, it's such a global movement, and so connected online in terms of inspiration, that there are a lot of similarities too.

***We've talked about Melbourne but you're originally from the Ukraine, what's the art scene like there as most people reading this won't have heard much about it, if anything?***

All street art there is pretty much political right now. A lot of A4-sized stencils and most of the tag names are quite reactionary and political. In Kharkov, someone writes 'Game Over' and another person writes 'Contra'. 'Bloc Kuchma' is pretty much written everywhere too. In Kiev there's a great column in the middle of the city with graffiti from the Orange Revolution that has been preserved, and there are a few really great street artists in there that are doing some interesting things too. But on the whole, street art seems to be reserved for more political ends.

***It could be perceived that some of your work gives importance to the seemingly unimportant aspects of life. Do you agree?***

I don't think the things I portray are unimportant, but I had never really thought about it that way. The characters that I draw are always based on friends and family who I get to pose for me and sometimes I take pictures of people on the street in the Ukraine. But mostly because I draw friends it's hard to think about the aspect of it being important or unimportant. It's more about small gestures and expressions in people.

***You studied philosophy at university. Does this influence your art at all or does it exist as an entirely separate entity for you?***

It's hard to explain how influential that's been. I think it made me realise what I wanted to do; interpret everything I was reading, or thinking about and turning it back into drawings or installations. But at the same time, I don't want to make insular art about philosophy, or about the art world – I can appreciate people that do, but sometimes I find it really esoteric and isolating. I guess it's just not what I want to make. So I'm glad I realised that very early on too.

***You've just brought out the book *Street/Studio*. Tell me about it and the process of compiling it?***

Thames & Hudson approached us to do a book about anything we wanted and it seemed really obvious what to do. To document the work of the ten people that feature in the book, and to bring Alison Young and Timba Smits into it as well. It's really just about artists in Melbourne who have a fine art practice but work on the streets as well. The book features a lot of interviews and images, although it's primarily about the notion that most people think that street art has notoriety and thus privilege to crossover into a gallery space. That's definitely true for some people, but many worked in galleries before hitting the streets. So it's a book that celebrates Melbourne, which at the same time exists as a reflection of the wider trend of street art and the issue of it becoming a bit more commodified, but also a little bit more popular and understood. Issues that most street artists seem to be going through – the tensions between making free art, and being an 'art world' commodity.

***Working as closely as you do with other artists, namely Ghostpatrol who you live with, do you ever find it restrictive or is it inspirational or indeed a mix of the two?***

It's definitely a balance between the both. Ghostpatrol and I live together and have a studio together, and we've done a lot of collaborative work and shows, so it eventually got to the point where we realised it was too easy. If you get stuck, you can ask the other person for ideas, so we had to train ourselves to be a bit more concise with our own work and be more





definitive between what we do together and what we do separately. A big point came when I decided to do my last show about the Ukraine, which is something I couldn't have done with him. I mean, he's never been there, let alone grown up there! We know each other inside out, so it helps to have someone being honest and critical too. It's really great to work on your own projects, and then come back and be really excited to work together with lots of new ideas.

**What's next?!**

I'm going to New York to start some new work and I also hope to get some street work done while I'm in London. There is also a big show in The National Gallery of Australia about street art so the second I get home I have to finish pieces for that and then I've got a solo show. Another big building installation, maybe based on a house my cousin and I sort of broke into in the Ukraine last week.

**Sounds like a busy year ahead. Aside from your swimming pool concept is there any one dream or aspiration you have for your work?**

I'd definitely love to do whole buildings, and life-size gypsy shacks. I've been making these paper cathedrals that light up from the inside, so to make a larger one which is similarly lit from the inside is the next step. Then maybe get a gypsy band playing outside or crammed inside. I've always wanted to make gargoyles of people, like my drawings, protecting buildings too. And the swimming pool, of course.

**I look forward to seeing what you come up with next!**