

Chicks on Speed

Chicks on Speed is a Munich-based band founded in 1997 that broke through stereotypes using an unabashed aesthetic of neon-coloured femme resistance. Attitude became vibrations, resounding from bodies draped in colourful fabric resonating through microphones and electric cables. Half-woman half-machine, part jet-engine, part exhaust(ed)-pipe - what is there not to celebrate about this body that can do so much and yet is told that it is so little? This all-female rock n' roll band was part of a movement in an indisputably male-dominated genre. Known as "riot grrls" the late 90's brought out a feminist response to the dark grunge style of the previous decade. Dressed in *P!nk*, or Peach(es) these upbeat recordings ultimately find methods to fuck the pain away. To persist on a (U for) Utopia that is constantly snatched away by regimes of precarity and alienation, sexism, racism, and class war.

This exhibition harnesses their punk attitude that continues to be relevant in our times, while updating the discourse by addressing the persistent inequalities within white Euro-centric feminism. The works of Anna Ehrenstein, Bel Fullana, Claudia Maté, and Qualeasha Wood adapt the themes of feminist resistance to the changing social and technological landscape of today. Connected through an aesthetic that is loud, unforgiving, bold, synthetic, colourful, and brave – they weave intricate visual battles aiming for a more equal future. These works contain energy, positivity, radical proposals, a desire for a better world, and an ultimate aim to denounce the persisting patriarchal, colonial and racist system through radical liberation.

Bel Fullana's paintings are bright and playful expressionistic canvases that portray liberated women in comic-like techno-environments. In *Techno Tiger* (2023) Fullana readily displays her technique as rough sprayed outlines spill out from a tiger's patterns onto the white canvas. Her subjects often depict seemingly dangerous and sexually liberated women surrounded by recent social media trends. In this case, the figure lies in a twisted position which faces the ground while spread-eagle over a white tiger. She holds a weapon in her hand with an unworried expression as a cosmic sci-fi landscape opens up beyond ionic columns. Five hundred euro notes litter the floor below her, indicating the reversal of patriarchal social stereotypes that must necessarily be dismantled not only in terms of social mores, but firstly, financially. In 2021, a BBC investigation found that paintings by women artists sell for one-tenth of those of men of equal recognition in their careers - Fullana's characters metaphorically indicate society's assumptions of the female artist while reclaiming her full due.¹

Anna Ehrenstein's work is auto-biographical and addresses the struggles of Muslim women framed by the western gaze. The artist's own identity as an Albanian immigrant to Germany is entangled with both the Islamic world as well as the peripheral position of the Balkans as the border between Islam and Christianity in South-East Europe. The symbol of the veil is often employed in her work as a metaphoric screen for Western projections. This point of view that Muslim women are in need of liberation that can only be delivered by the hands of the self-identifying "more developed" West. The neo-colonial implications of such assumptions dissolve in her techno-optimism that positions the Muslim woman as cyber-femme including her own orientalist avatar. In a video, the long history of women's achievements within the Islamic world are shown in the figure of Fatima al-Fihri – the founder al-Qarawiyyin in 859 A.D. in the city of Fez, which today is considered the oldest

¹ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m0019z2b>

university in the world. Fatima's figure is found in Ehrenstein's lenticular prints which present her as an amulet against the evil eye and the weaponization of the muslim femme cyborg, by the will of God.

Claudia Maté has become an internationally recognized symbol of digital art through her CGI animations that have become not only works of art, but have appeared in numerous and varied collaborations with television programs such as Adult Swim and high fashion brands including Balenciaga and Alexander Wang. Like rock n' roll, the worlds of programming and even fashion are heavily dominated by male engineers and fashion house founders, and Maté's surreal and at times grotesque visual style dives into the subconscious imagination of the internet with surreal and pixelated aesthetics. In *Kittens Inspired by Kittens*, the figures of Doraemon and XXX ride a celebratory parade of bacchanalia, turning childhood experience into adult escapism. In *Down the Shining Hole*, a unicorn sits among an underwater scene, mixing fantasy worlds with video-game aesthetics in the context of an abyssal realm. Cuteness and innocence are remixed into dark and disturbing scenes.

Qualeasha Wood works with textile and digital images which at first may seem to be a clash of worlds, but which come together to speak of her experience as a queer black woman in contemporary US society. Textile has long been associated with women's tasks but also as a metaphor for the digital world in which individual threads are seen as a precursor to the pixel. Sprinkled with selfies, text messages, and Catholic iconography, the pieces speak to the power and complexity of self-representation in a digital age mired with racial and sexual inequalities deeply entrenched within society. Wood's critique of the contemporary refuses to acquiesce and step into the subdued acceptance of violence towards black women that has pervaded for centuries and is yet to cease. By taking her own image and stitching it in complex tapestries, she juxtaposes the rapidity of the internet with the labour of producing this fabric – in doing this the decision to make a specific image is turned into the power of re-appropriating her own image and fully controlling its dissemination as a fetishistic holy icon of self-reverence and desire. The internet is a place that offers liberation for marginalised communities but simultaneously increases the circulation of images and objectification of bodies. This leaves these same communities vulnerable to new forms of digital exploitation.

The connecting attitude between elements of this exhibition are contained in the bravery to face the world with a critical voice that refuses to step down. The necessity of *riot grrl* in the 90's is still relevant today in its new more inclusive forms because society has not sufficiently addressed the every-day violence suffered by women, especially those who are racially and sexually marginalised. These works convey the figures of empowered women who put their vulnerabilities on display and expose ongoing injustices. In an increasingly hostile environment in which the United States is passing anti-trans laws², in which *Roe vs. Wade* remains overturned³, and in which the rise of right-wing parties across the world threatens for this trend to spread, organised resistance remains a necessity. *Chicks on Speed* is a techno-optimist vision that doesn't necessarily see the future as a utopia – but that positions technology and the cyborg-femme-body as a powerful visual call-to-action.

- Àngels Miralda

² <https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/2022/10/14/anti-trans-bills/>

³ <https://www.npr.org/2022/06/24/1102305878/supreme-court-abortion-roe-v-wade-decision-overturn>