

TRACTOR BUDDY

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BEL FULLANA

BEL FULLANA, A NEW DIMENSION: FEMININITY AND ALIENISM

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The work of visual artist Bel Fullana (Mallorca, 1985) has been read and interpreted from different points of view and perspectives, yet most of them coincide in highlighting an ironic review of a feminine visual world inspired by trashy, working class aesthetics. The fact that these aesthetics and attitudes are currently idolised by brands, artists and cultural products is something that the artist loves and detests in equal measure. It is this ambivalent position that gives birth to the protagonists of her paintings: characters with green, purple or blue skin, with tattoos of dolphins, barbed wire, skulls and broken hearts, laden with chains and accessories, metallic grunge jewellery, dressed in white fishnet stockings, wearing uncovered lingerie and biker boots, in the purest Tomasa del Real style. Most of them are smokers and love industrial cigarettes. They stand out for their long extensions of braided or ponytailed synthetic hair, and are known for driving motorised tigers and unicorns under the light of an ever-full moon as they ride around the canvas toting their MIAU brand machine guns.

From fantasy—that which we know as the faculty of the mind to reproduce, by means of images, things past or distant, to represent ideals in tangible form or even to idealise conceivable realities with an erasure of shortcomings and conflicts by simply declaring that they do not exist—a spot for an unknown dimension emerges. In Bel Fullana's parallel universe, the darkness of techno and raves lost deep in the woods of the 1990s come together with the lifestyles of the periphery and the urban outskirts, now totally engulfed by musical movements linked to drugs, violence, sex, friendship and love, such as trap and reggaeton.

Cover image: Bel Fullana, *Tractor Buddy*, 2024 (detail).
Courtesy of the artist

The collection of works Bel Fullana has produced in recent years create a fluorescent, coloured galactic catwalk—similar to the one made by the *Biker Mice From Mars* (1993) with the green smoke coming out of their motorbikes' exhaust pipes—on which the hypersexualised bodies of Gyal culture now parade, monsterised and alienised. Those curvaceous and exuberant figures that were embodied in the 1990s by sexual icons such as Pamela Anderson, the axis of pop culture at the time, who in 1996 starred in the cult film for lovers of trashy aesthetics based on the well-known comic book character Barb Wire. A leather and silicone dystopia, directed by David Hogan, that brought to life the character from the comic of the same name, originally published by Dark Horse Comics.

The story of *Barb Wire* is set in an apocalyptic future in 2017, as the United States is being ravaged by the Second American Civil War. A mercenary and nightclub owner, played by Pamela Anderson, becomes embroiled in a contraband conspiracy to overthrow the leader of the resistance in Steel Harbor, a place that seems to come straight out of a sequel to *Escape from New York* or *Mad Max*. But, beyond the plot, what we are interested in observing these key references of 1990s visual culture, such as *Barb Wire* and *Showgirls*, are the aesthetic forms and sensibilities, traces of which survive in Bel Fullana's work. We wonder how this type of commercial film production, in which each scene was an excuse to show off a new hairstyle and a new outfit, would end up deriving in a camp or tasteless sensibility in which brazenness and exuberant make-up, along with the dominatrix-style corset collections, disruptive cleavages and stiletto heels, which would double up as projectile weapons, contributed to the representation of an ideal of beauty so anachronistic that it would come to connect with the visual world of drag culture. Keep in mind that camp sensibility involves examining how irony, humour, pastiche, artifice, theatricality and exaggeration are expressed in fashion.

In her celebrated "Notes on 'Camp'", from 1964, Susan Sontag wrote that camp is a certain kind of aestheticism that is not established in terms of beauty, but in terms of the degree of artifice, of stylisation. She named some random examples and placed them in the canon of camp: Tiffany lamps, Aubrey Beardsley's drawings, *Swan Lake*, Visconti's direction of *Salome* and 'Tis Pity She's a Whore, Schoedsack's *King Kong*, women's clothes of the 1920s (feather boas, fringed and beaded dresses, etc.).

Camp taste has an affinity for [...] all the elements of visual decor [...]. For Camp art is often decorative art, emphasizing texture, sensuous surface, and style at the expense of content. [...] As a taste in persons, Camp responds particularly to the markedly attenuated and to the strongly exaggerated. [...] Camp sees everything in quotation marks. It's not a lamp, but a "lamp"; not a woman, but a "woman". [...] The question isn't, "Why travesty, impersonation, theatricality?" The question is, rather, "When does travesty, impersonation, theatricality acquire the special flavor of Camp?"

— Susan Sontag, "Notes on 'Camp'"¹

Bel Fullana rejects inverted commas. Inverted commas are way too boomer. This is probably because, for those of us who grew up in the 1990s, this difference no longer exists. The aesthetic sensibility that runs through us, the material ways in which our worlds and imagery, as well as our relationships with people, spaces and objects, are configured are already in quotation marks by default. We grew up

1. Citation reworked based on some of the ideas put forward by Susan Sontag in her essay "Notes on 'Camp'". In: *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject: A Reader*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999, p. 55-56.

alienated by a constant confrontation with the alienness of artifice, irony, theatricality and commercial exaggeration. For this reason, in Bel Fullana's deliberately ugly and malicious paintings we find a representation of femininity in the gender expression that is constructed through post-identity discourses, manifested as a monstified and alien femininity that invites us to think about the forms that gender is acquiring, as an image or object, as a cultural medium. An expression of everything femme, ironically monstified, that is inscribed within one of the main contemporary debates: identity in times of globalisation and its relationship with the fashion and luxury industry; and of post-ironic languages (that is, when ironic intentions get confused with genuine ones, often possessing different layers of meaning that are inseparable from what happens via the internet). Hence, a female figure smoking a cigarette in the artist's paintings is no longer an erotic metaphor for popular culture; nor is the image of a woman riding a 700-plus-horsepower motorbike the representation of the stereotypically sexy, powerful, warrior woman we saw in the 1990s. The fact that she paints alien-like characters with weapons, be they guns, knives or even just a cigarette to burn someone's eye out with, makes the artist see herself reflected in it. There is no metaphor or allegory here. Two shots in the air: bang, bang.

The dystopian future of *Barb Wire* reappeared in Kyiv, in 2022, when singer Rosalía gathered the best stunt girls from all over the world to shoot the video for the second single from her album *Motomami*, released a year after Bel Fullana completed work on her paintings titled *MotoMiau* [Moto-Meow] (2021) and *Motoputón* [Motoslut] (2021).

Saoko was filmed prior to the escalation of tensions that placed Ukraine in the eye of the hurricane of international politics. Before Vladimir Putin threatened to invade the country, Rosalía and a group of women bikers specialised in high-speed acrobatics and pirouettes (stunt riders) travelled

to the Ukrainian capital to shoot a video full of velocity, bikinis, bombastic asses and wheelies, all with a feminised *Fast & Furious* aesthetic.

The video, directed by Valentin Petit, draws on the suburban aesthetic that Rosalía had already nationalised in previous works through her representation of the *parkineo* phenomenon and trucker life. For this occasion, she hired a spectacular gang of girl bikers to perform their mind-blowing acrobatics on the Podilskyi-Voskresensky Bridge in Kyiv. Rosalía brought together the best and most widely recognised stunt girls, including Kateřina Jandová, Ashley Lamella, Emma Serdiuk and Alona Shevchenko, styled by Haley Wollens with pieces made for the occasion by Mugler (the guru of empowerment via corsets and latex), and she dressed herself in a vintage top by Jean Paul Gaultier—the same design Kylie Minogue wore in *All the Lovers*—and added some lingerie by Ukrainian brand Zhilyova. All very Y2K, with something of the spirit of Harmony Korine's *Spring Breakers* (2013), with those reflective bikinis, and a lot of Japanese anime: the cat-eared motorbike helmets, which, beyond Akira, are one of the best-selling models made by Russian firm Nitrinos, and the Sailor Moon-esque long pink ponytails that imported a version of *cuki* (meaning 'cute', in Spanish slang) to the suburbs.

The Catalan singer, who has become, in today's music industry, the quintessential face of commodified cultural identity, claimed in several interviews that *Saoko*'s ultra-catchy reggaeton beat and her various calls to God, along with references to drag queens and Greek mythology adding to the creation of pseudo-metaphysical and existential lyrics, made up the ingredients for the perfect combination to seduce the masses. But it was surely its allusions to female empowerment that would make the hit a mass phenomenon on a global scale. Rosalía said that the spirit of a *Motomami* can be summed up as having "grace and courage, strength

and vulnerability, fierce femininity and a brave attitude without any complexes". Protected by this shield, she raised the banner of an "uncomfortable feminism" that, rather than uncomfortable, we could call "commodity feminism". Wheelies and pirouettes.

Unlike a Motomami, concerned with embodying a brave and fierce femininity, a MotoMiau or Motopotón is not concerned with grace or courage, and their gender expression, rather than feminine, is feminoid. Their sensibility: *cukisimister*. Afflicted with a painful, commodified vulnerability. There is a hint of horror in their innocence. The features and proportions of their figures are miles away from the strictly sweet side of *cuki* because they are an anatomical mess. Their forms are distorted and tinged by the shadow of something uncertain, elusive, alienated, devious, threatening, sly, anxious, absurd and resilient. In them we find something naïve, but at the same time cunning, perfectly formed, but also deformed, known and unknown, causing well-being and discomfort, close and untouchable, harmless and shrill. All this with a playful attitude and without allowing us (their friends, public and recipients) to know whether these apparent opposites are in tension or in harmony. Their terrifying play on the very idea of play, their self-irony, their apparent rejection of both harsh reality and grand ideals through their mocking of opacity embrace uncertainty and strangeness.

A Motopotón is a *cukiterrorist*. So is a MotoMiau. They take advantage of the fact that indeterminacy, when taken to the extreme, becomes threatening: a circumstance that Bel Fullana's fantasy feminoids manage to make captivating precisely because they do it in a frivolous and seductive way, in a deliberately nonchalant style. They express the feeling that life lacks stable and lasting foundations. And they often do so with something that could be likened to artifice and exaggeration, expressing themselves in a way that dethrones seriousness, or fails to achieve it, as Sontag argued about the concept of camp.

From the Riding Girl Gang to the Monster Girl Fan

In Bel Fullana's acid-tinged figurativism we can identify certain references and inspirations from the work of visual and music artists such as Katherine Bernhard, Austin Lee, Michael Swaney, La Zowi, Hofmannita, Grimes, Zheani and María Forqué aka Virgen María, to name just a few, and coexisting alongside these, certain more or less hidden references to cultural influences that marked the artist's childhood, such as *My Little Pony*, the *Care Bears* and *Sailor Moon*. Some of their traces are manifested in Bel's visual world in the form of an alien cosmology that, taking it to the extreme, could be read based on the xenofeminist theories elaborated by artists and writers linked to science fiction, such as Patricia Reed and Amy Ireland, from the Laboria Cuboniks collective. A speculative feminism for the 21st century that seeks to transform our understanding of what it means to be human and create new perspectives from which to observe and relate to the world, as well as construct different formulations of what makes sense and how we construct our relationship with the unknown.

For the "Tractor Buddy" exhibition, the artist has worked on the transformation of her figurative painting into the creation of a sculpture that exists in the zone known as Monster Girl Fan, maintaining a humanoid form, yet in which monstrosity occurs when placed somewhere between that which is childish and adult, masculine and feminine, non-human and human, known and unknown, impotent and powerful, spontaneous and deliberate. But above all it occurs in a light-hearted and often frivolous register. Its sexualised aesthetic, as well as the subordination of its forms to the consumer good, are the prevailing understanding of *cukiterror*: a sinister deformation of the aesthetics of helplessness, or an affective response to weakness, revolving around the desire for an increasingly intimate and sensual

relationship with objects in which an unfamiliar but not necessarily threatening presence can be perceived.

Bel Fullana's *cukiterrorist* sculpture uses its vulnerability to seduce and manipulate us, whispering in our ears the question of how much power matters, whether this is a game or a struggle, and who is on top. It reminds us that in our relationships we often ignore who is in charge, because *cukiterrorists* invite you to play with them and then punish you with their fury, partly genuine and partly pretended, for having done so. They enjoy being the victims of power, but only if it appears as a game. Any serious attempt to intimidate or truly overpower them will be met with rejection. They lure you in and then spit you out with a captivating smile on their lips. One day they act as slaves, giving up their autonomy, offering themselves as playthings at your disposal, and the next day they act as masters, dictating the terms of their relationship with you. Hence it is deeply unfair and simply wrong to assert that the process by which *cukiterrorism* is transmitted to the visitors of a contemporary art exhibition deprives its objects of strength, forcing them into ridiculous situations and making them appear more ignorant and vulnerable than they really are. In fact, it is quite the opposite: the process by which *cukiterrorism* is transferred to the spectator of a work of art or an exhibition can empower the *cukiterrorist* object by allowing it to play with the spectator's idea of their own life force, either by portraying them in a dominant position, by sowing uncertainty regarding who has the upper hand, or by making them realise that the apparent surrender of the *cukiterrorist* object is actually a way of tempting and trapping them, either by demanding care or protection.

Cukiterrorists evade all forms of responsibility. They are amoral, totally indifferent to morality, seemingly unaware of conventional concepts of right and wrong. Nevertheless, they are fully aware of the world's disasters. In fact, to some

extent, they personify them, but they do not turn to morality for solutions. They may seem a little cruel to us, but they are not spiteful. They can be a little aggressive, but they are not vengeful. *Cukiterrorism* has a hidden side that we often see as if looking in a mirror: carefree humour, cheekiness and outlandish behaviour give Bel Fullana's new creature its strength, its new dimension.



Bel Fullana, *MotoMiau*. 2021. Oil and spray on canvas,
140 x 190 cm. Courtesy of the artist



Bel Fullana, *Motopotón*, 2021. Oil and spray on canvas,
180 x 200 cm. Courtesy of the artist



Bel Fullana in her studio, 2024



Bel Fullana, *Tractor Buddy*, 2024. Expanded polystyrene carving, polyurea, 3D printing, motorbike headlights, PVC, wood, metal, plastic, spray paint, enamel, fabric, electric cables and synthetic hair, 165 x 138 x 210 cm. Courtesy of the artist



Bel Fullana, *Tractor Buddy*, 2024 (detail)



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ART POWER

Kenny Schachter

With a vast and wide-ranging history dating from the Muslim period of the late 9th century, the campus of Es Baluard Museu d'Art Contemporani de Palma has evolved in a mere 20 years from a military fortress to a flourishing institution and exhibition space, not to mention a resource for family and school workshops and a forum for debate and repose. What an artistically diverse landscape that could serve as a model for the rest of the planet, mired in unprecedented conflicts of war, human disruption and upheaval!

On the occasion of her solo museum exhibition at Es Baluard Museu, this essay addresses the art of Bel Fullana, born in 1985 in Mallorca, educated in Barcelona and the 2017 recipient of the Ciutat de Palma Visual Arts Award. Despite obvious influences of the garish and gaudy local touristic culture, Fullana's works and career are international in scope and breadth—citing the widespread ciphers of international youth, having exhibited from Seoul to New York.

Frozen in the amber of disobedient, rebellious teenagers, Fullana crafts a chaotic Earth peopled with adolescents and animals running wild, ruling the roost. Invariably, these protagonists of her own devising are armed with cigarettes dangling out of their mouths, toting mortally dangerous weaponry—oftentimes straddling wild motorcycles—seemingly without a care or worry in the universe.

The godlike master of all creative domains (represented in the encyclopedic permanent collection of Es Baluard Museu)—painting, printmaking, sculpture and ceramics—Pablo Picasso said: “It took me four years(!) to paint like Raphael, but a lifetime to paint like a child.” The funny and fun, joyfully colorful and exuberant compositions of Bel Fullana rendered

in an immature, naive manner describe a perennial condition of play but belie the anarchistic mayhem of an imperfect and flawed humanity.

Elemental trappings signifying the unbridled imaginations and behaviors of children to early adults—cartoonish wild-eyed cats, demonic dragons and menacing modes of transport—combine and combust in a hallucinogenic mix of hypersexualized fetish and fantasy. Contemporary hieroglyphs in the forms of pills, diamonds and dollar signs symbolize relentless global aspirations, addictions and obsessions from alcohol and drug dependency to the ostentatious display of grotesque wealth.

Hers is an idealized state of humankind inhabited by an exclusively all-girl cast of fishnet-clad characters and their sidekicks drawn from the animal kingdom. This is a world of female dominance, and omnipotence where there is no room (or need) for men. Misandry—the hatred or dislike of men—is the counterpart of misogyny, a mindset that pathetically dominates many corners of education, politics, business and pretty much everything else. It's a refreshing turn of events.

Bel's tattooed, hedonistic young women are in careless and constant pursuit of the pleasure principle; but, rather than the instinctive seeking of debauchery and the avoidance of pain to satisfy primal biological and psychological needs, they seem more intent on inflicting as much havoc and agony as they can on others—in all probability, their male counterparts. They are running roughshod while ignoring societal conventions and having a damn good time in the process.

There are plenty of precedents in art history of the flouting of norms in the explicit distortions of iconic female artists like Lee Lozano (1930–1999) and Judith Bernstein (b. 1942) in works that not only confront the viewer with graphic and (what appear as) deskilled depictions of oral fixations and genitals, but practically grab you by the throat and smack you across the face! These artists convey an uncomfortable

and haunting sense of insolence and defiance in paintings and drawings that taunt and mock anyone and everyone that stands before them.

Bel Fullana has rewritten history by perfecting the imperfect immediacy of her surroundings, albeit in a demented, scary and frightening fashion. However, don't be mistaken, Fullana's art is sanguine in its hopeful reinterpretation of reality while longing for more equal footing in the still male dominated context of the artworld . . . and life in general. And let's not forget the clinically established—through decades of medical research—medicinal power of art to heal and ameliorate depression and anxiety. A Fullana piece, in spite of it all, is as covetable and jewellike as the precious stones she frequently paints.

In light of all this, things would certainly be a whole hell of a lot different (and much improved), from a humanistic standpoint, if we managed to follow the example of Es Baluard Museu, which so seamlessly transitioned from a late-16th-century artillery school to such a forward-thinking and adventurous space—a paradigm many nations could stand to learn, and their populaces benefit from. Besides, the power of art trumps all.



Digital design of the project's logo. Courtesy of the artist

Tractor Buddy

Bel Fullana

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