

Almost everyone growing up in the 1990s at some point watched the cult comedy *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective*. Jim Carrey's performance in the movie about a quirky detective and defender of human rights brought him worldwide fame. This exhibition by artist duo COUPLE - Swiss painter Louisa Gagliardi and Adam Cruces, originally from Texas - takes its title from a moment in the movie when a moneyed lady accosted by Ace Ventura for wearing fur responds: "There is nothing wrong with enjoying the fruits of nature." At the "Fruits of Nature" exhibition, the fruits of nature are converted to a more general level, becoming the banal human vices and needs that we all - consciously or subconsciously - wish to tolerate.

The following interview took place on the occasion of COUPLE's exhibition at Berlínskej model and besides the show itself examines the practices of each artist and their use of different media.

Monika Čejková: Let's begin at the beginning and talk about how it all started. When did you meet one another?

Couple: We met in August 2009 at Bryant Park, NYC at one of the outdoor movie screenings they do during the summer. Louisa was on vacation and I was living in Brooklyn, a mutual friend introduced us.

MČ: What was your first project about?

Couple: Since we've been 'officially' together, we've had our hands in each others' work in various ways. Though 'Over and Under' with Greg Ito was our first time putting work together in an art context, our project 'Private Views' was the first true collaboration. Working on the same pieces, as one author, with one vision. 'Private Views' was a series of 4 paintings on the disproportionately large tags of women's thongs, for a group show at Hole of The Fox, Antwerp in 2016. The paintings were different landscapes corresponding to the colors of the panties and were hung on 3D prints of the Nefertiti bust. Thus connecting the dots between nature and the female form.

MČ: How would you characterize your artist partnership?

Couple: Best friends who get to share everything, ranging from personal to professional?

MČ: I get the feeling that both your individual work and what you produce together is brimming with sarcasm. I'm curious – what's the source of your specific sense of humor? I didn't think it was exactly the domain of either Switzerland or Texas, where you come from.

Couple: I'm not sure that either of us would use the word sarcastic, perhaps we'd lean more towards skeptical or critical. Although there is plenty of sincerity thrown in with the skepticism and humor that you're sensing. Individually, both our families have pretty good senses of humor, even if that notion isn't necessarily geographically associated with where we grew up. Together that gets amplified in our collaborative work, probably more so than in either of our personal practices.

MČ: You impart a certain gravity to the banal motifs of the everyday world, an aura of magic, which you then snub in the way you render the subject, the titles of the exhibition and the artworks etc. Is it a form of fabulation?

Couple: In the collaborative work, we approach themes like intimacy or sensuality, with a healthy dose of playfulness. Those topics can be heavy or intense, so while we exaggerate their expression, we also downplay severe seriousness. We try to find a balance between coarse crudeness and tender fragility.

MČ: You're part of the young generation active on Instagram. What do you think of the role of Instagram in influencing contemporary art?

Couple: We both still check it everyday, it's a very useful tool for giving and receiving information. But I think it's safe for us to say, that we're both losing interest. It's almost become too much of a professional tool (for which we share the blame). Not to mention it makes whatever is shared feel so disposable. Once a certain moment or work is shared, it's like it can't be shared again (except maybe

for a #tbt or #fbf further down the line). That becomes a little sad. Time and energy given to generate these gestures is only good for a few likes and comments in a period of about 24 hours, and then their lifespan on social media has passed. And the more recent addition of 'stories' has only accelerated the disposability. Neither of us is on Facebook anymore, and we don't miss it. Not hard to imagine reaching the same point with Instagram someday.

MČ: A certain skepticism regarding social networks and the Internet in general crops up in your work. For example, Louisa's early paintings reflecting on the way social networks are used, depicting a figure of some startled voyeur as if "caught in the act" - illuminated by a screen, he becomes a target of ridicule. Do you feel that this theme interests you consciously as artists?

Couple: Those earlier works were mostly based on images taken with a phone and captured people in moments of personal thought or zoning out. Like feeling invisible in a public space or social setting, which everyone can relate to. So it's not really about ridicule, but highlighting that shared, familiar feeling. That topic of social networks is still fascinating. As we grow less enthralled by it personally, we don't really deal with it in a directly representational way in either of our practices, though the notion of (dis)connectedness is still repeatedly involved in the work.

MČ: Where do you think your work intersects?

Couple: There are definitely certain subjects where the work intersects, such as human interaction with the landscape, domesticity, or consumption. However, the real intersection is the exchanges we have before, during, and after the work. Especially in the exchanges not dealing with anything professionally related.

MČ: How do you work on a joint project? By that I also mean the way you select the medium for an artwork, because you each work in a different discipline. While Louisa is a painter, Adam makes site-specific installations.

Couple: We tend to use opportunities for joint projects to explore materials, ideas, approaches we might not explore in our individual bodies of work. So the collaboration ends up being a mixture of a site-responsive approach and painting, along with figuration and abstraction.

Louisa, when I first saw your paintings in 2015, a connection immediately occurred to me to magical realism or the work of Giorgio de Chirico and his metaphysical painting or the Surrealism of Rene Magritte. Since then, I've been following the growing interest in capturing the mysteries and oddities of everyday reality in the case of a whole series of young artists – they often turn to using realistic devices and media, they have an interest in detail, but also an unusual approach to perspective. What do you think lies behind this interest?

Louisa: I clearly can't speak for everyone with similar work, interests, or approaches, but I think it has something to do with a lot of the crazy stuff happening in the world today. Tons of frightening political activity, terrifying technological problems, exciting technological advancements, and of course the spread of helpful information, as well as misinformation. These sorts of things make our reality feel quite unreal. The work becomes a place to convey that feeling, while simultaneously serving as an escape.

MČ: It seems to me that as an artist duo you convert "magical realism" into 3D. What do you think about that?

Couple: The term 'magical realism' is something new to us, but there are works that we have done together which would undoubtedly fit that description. A tiled pedestal wearing a beret smoking an e-cigarette. An invisible figure in a robe lounging in an inverted tiled umbrella alongside a spoon and teacup covered in cigarettes. Or a remote control loaf of bread on wheels. These could all fit that bill.

MČ: Maybe one could also find parallels to these objects and the aesthetic of your paintings in contemporary sci-fi, such as the films *Her*, *Blade Runner* or in web and TV series like *Dark*, *Twin Peaks* or *Stranger Things*. Is the sci-fi genre inspirational for you, for example?

Couple: For sure! I tend to watch movies a lot, while Louisa watches more TV series. But we both enjoy Sci-Fi. There's so much imagination to be explored in that realm, while still being grounded in a reality, which is why it's more appealing to us than the Fantasy genre (Lord of the Rings, Labyrinth, etc.). Sci-Fi often displays (advanced) technology in a cautionary light, especially in something like 'Black Mirror' - this of course ties back into the social media issue we were discussing before. We routinely consider ways to capture the similar presence or atmosphere of eerie wonder found in a lot of Sci-Fi.

MČ: As far as your projects are concerned, the 2016 action Man's Best Friend & Forbidden Fruit stands out, when you exhibited paintings in a cow shed. The project is positioned on the level of some kind of pseudo-scientific work. What was that about?

Couple: That was a fun and peculiar project organized and curated by Paul Barsch. 'Paintings Reflecting On Humans And Human Habits, But Mostly Viewed By Cows' was the full title of exhibition. He approached us with this idea of a figurative painting show that would be presented in a barn in the Swiss Alps, as part of the Art Safiental Biennial. Each contribution was printed on canvas and then hung in the barn where the cows are kept. Keeping all of that in mind we decided to each do a self-portrait and then have the other do something on top of it. Given the concept of the show (reflecting on humans and their habits), Louisa put dogs (man's best friend) over my portrait, and I put apples (forbidden fruit, as associated with Eve) over her portrait. In that way we both reflected on ourselves, through our portraits, and each other (human nature), through the collaborative additions. These works being mostly viewed by cows was a bonus, of course.

Louisa, how do you go about making your paintings? What kinds of tools and materials do you actually use most often?

Louisa: Most things begin with an image, either one I have in my mind or something I've seen, and commonly a combination of the two. This will lead to a sketch done by hand with pen or pencil on paper, which is then brought onto the computer. From there I develop the colors, dimensionality, and so forth. Once I've reached the point of satisfaction with the digital image, I have it printed on PVC. When I have the print, I frequently add physical layers of some sort (paint, gel medium, nail polish, etc.) over specific areas of the printed image that I want to draw attention to. It's really a synthesis of both analog and digital tools.

MČ: Do you consider yourself to be a painter?

Louisa: The short answer is yes. That label communicates what I do in the most simple and effective way to the most people.

MČ: Have the paintings you exhibit as an artist duo been made in collaboration?

Couple: Yes.

MČ: The exhibition "Fruits of Nature" in Berlínskej model plays with the motif of "common accidents" such as wine spills, cigarette burns, insects on the windscreen of a car etc. Could you clarify your intentions a little?

Couple: 'Fruits of Nature' was actually taken from a line in the movie 'Ace Ventura: When Nature Calls.' Jim Carrey's character, a pet detective and animal lover, is appalled when he sees a woman wearing a fox skin as an accessory at a party. He confronts her about it, she responds 'there's nothing wrong with enjoying the fruits of nature.' In that case, fruits of nature = animals/ animal skins. What we liked about that turn of phrase is that it can apply to pretty much anything under the sun - animals, natural accidents, human nature. (Scene: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cj1wcs7SZj0>)

MČ: Is the title "Fruits of Nature" supposed to motivate the viewer not to perceive these events negatively, but instead as miracles of nature?

Couple: It's not quite meant to be positive or negative. On one hand, there is some beauty to be appreciated in a cigarette burn or a wine stain. On the other hand, there is something slightly off-putting in the exchange of saliva during a passionate kiss.

MČ: Cigarette smoke and spilled red wine is a theme that you have worked with previously. At the show *An Address in French* (2016) you presented an installation consisting of upturned wine glasses, and a figure with a cigarette was at one stage the motif in Louisa's paintings. In what way will motifs be presented at the exhibition in Berlínskej model?

Couple: In this instance, the cigarettes and wine are both used in two different manners. In one case, they're utilized as the content of the image, which can be seen in the piece with the ashtray and the clinking wine glasses. In the other case, the wine and cigarettes are physically used as the mark-making tools to create abstract compositions. Abstract compositions are something rather unusual for us. However, with those abstractions being on the 'shirts' they do have a figurative connotation.

MČ: Are your projects introspective? I'm asking because your installations always have a strong narrative element.

Couple: Our solo practices both incorporate elements of introspection, but with Louisa's there is a stronger narrative element. Like the humor we were addressing before, this introspection gets amplified in the collaborative work. At the same time, the work is certainly not autobiographical.

Louisa Gagliardi (born 1989, Switzerland) received her BFA from Ecole Cantonale d'Art de Lausanne (ECAL) Bachelor in Graphic Design, 2012. In 2015, she started working with the painting medium. The artist initially processes images characterized by their flatness with a computer program, subsequently printing them on PVC. She then intervenes in some areas of the painting by hand.

Adam Cruces (born 1985, Texas, USA) received his BFA from Kansas City Art Institute in 2008, and his MFA from Zürcher Hochschule der Künste in 2013. He is a multimedia artist mostly working with site-specific installations developing the theme of the balance between the gravity of certain situations and time devoted to recreation. His installations often contain unstable objects that decay with time.

Currently they both live in Zurich.