

ZABLUDOWICZ COLLECTION

Trulee Hall: In conversation
Zabludowicz Collection

Antonia Blocker: Hello, my name is Antonia Blocker, I am the Senior Curator: Performance & Engagement here at the Zabludowicz Collection and today I am joined by Trulee Hall. Trulee is our annual commission and her show is currently up at Zabludowicz Collection, we are sitting inside it, and I'm very excited that she's here today from LA, both to install the show and to talk to me. So we're going to speak quite briefly, we are going to cover a few questions that will hopefully give everyone a sense of who Trulee is, what she's about and the show itself.

So my first question is about your opera, *Tongues Duel the Corn Whores*, which is presented in our main space. And obviously we asked you to do the annual commission before we asked you to do the opera, it was a couple of months later that we then asked you if you would like to make an opera as part of our season *Hot with Excess*, which sadly was mostly postponed, apart from your performance, which was fantastic, I am glad we got to do it back in March. So I am wondering; you hadn't made an opera before, what was it about the format of the opera that you were interested in that made you say 'yes' to this proposal?

Trulee Hall: Great question, and thank you for having me, I am really happy to be sitting here talking to you. So, I've always played music since I was a baby, my mother was a piano teacher so even as a tiny toddler and even age zero, I was sitting by the piano while she gave lessons, so it's sort of innately in my mind and brain. And then we had a family blue-grass band, so music is a kind of part of my life that has been slightly ignored in the last 10 years, as I focussed on my art career. So the idea of doing an opera was to me the most sublime opportunity to take, not only my art work, incorporating the musical aspect, but to do something really theatrical and live – of course, I'm going to say yes! Hell yes! Let's do it, like there was no hesitation. It's the greatest opportunity I have ever been given and I feel like it's really made use of all of my interests and talents into one giant thing, which we've now turned into a film so I get to do all the above. All the things I want to do, it's the most complete art form to me, doing something live at that scale was really satisfying and terrifying at the same so. Yeah, of course, I would want to do that and I'm really proud in even a short amount of time that I managed to wrangle something so ambitious, so – thank you for asking me!

AB: Oh yeah, I mean it was a great project to work on, and the outcome has been fantastic and that was part of what interested me about opera, that it has all these different aspects to it, and it was so amazing to see the set, and the costumes and the music, and the performers all kind of come together in our space and produce this amazing thing.

I wanted to come back to the idea of music. Because you were saying that you come from this very musical background and you feel that you've kind of put music to one side. And I know you've said before that when you were at CalArts studying you kind of felt you had to decide between these two things. That an arts career and a music career were both such kind of unachievable things in a way that you felt you had to focus on just one. So I know that music is a huge part of your practice and you make all the soundtracks and scores for your work so it's still there, but what was it about art that made you think, this is the one? Why did you choose it and what could visual arts do that music can't?

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TH: That's such a great question. So my answer is slightly practical so I will start there, but... so it's not even so much choosing between art and music as an experience for the viewer, but more as the world of that, like in a commercial sense. So if I was going to choose music and decide, ok, I am going to focus on music as my main ... this year, I also have to probably tour, do all these live performances, and I'm actually very shy, so um... and I hate travelling and I like to be alone...so like, just practically speaking the music world to me was like – yeah, no. It was like that really went against the grain of my personality. So if I'm writing music alone at home, and I can record it, and I'm in the mood – then that's the sublime spot for me where, in front of a live audience, I'm like eerrrugh, a weird space, like on the road. I just... that was not my happy place. So, practically speaking, I wanted a huge space, I wanted a big studio, so I can create these large sculptures and then like, go between painting and sculpture and music, so to me, practically speaking the music world just didn't make sense. And in my art, I knew I could incorporate the music, even though it wasn't the main focus, I could still bring that to life and utilise my interests in that, in the videos and the live performances. So I feel like I get the best of both worlds. As someone who likes to be alone and kind of isolated in my own world, the art world was just more conducive to my natural way of being. And on top of that, I feel like music does translate into your brain into a totally different way than art does. But I do feel like art is more challenging, I must say, it's like – to me – a greater challenge where you can write a sad song and everyone is going to feel sad immediately, it's like... but what I am trying to convey is much more complex.

AB: Yeah, so you feel like visual art is, in a way, more nuanced.

TH: Yes.

AB: Interesting! Ok...

TH: Not that it's better...

AB: Right.

TH: ...but it is a different way your brain translates information

AB: Sure, but for you personally it felt like the more comfortable or appropriate place to express what you want to?

TH: Exactly, yeah, and I also love the contrast between – sometimes like, I'll have some sexy music and then it's like not sexy, the visuals... so like the playing between the two – I don't know – I think they work really well together as a whole.

AB: Yeah, absolutely. And this idea of your 'world' is really interesting because your works are so incredibly rich in their kind of crazy narratives, and these fantastic characters. It's obvious that your imagination is vast and expansive and many of these characters kind of start life in a painting. So you have *Eve and Eve* which is the work in *Serpent Dance for the Red Witches*, and then you have *Two Heads, Two Ways*, which is the genesis of the project that we are sitting in right now. And I am wondering kind of where does the inspiration for these paintings come from, like what is the kernel that creates the characters that go into the painting that then allows this amazing evolution into these more immersive works?

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TH: Yes – another great question. So there isn't really one answer, but I will give you a kind of general... what I do is I get in the mood, I have a canvas ready, I'm like – you know, got my music going and just start. Like, this painting I am looking at right now with is the *Two Heads, Two Ways*, I didn't do a sketch, I didn't do anything to prepare, I just had a canvas ready and went – tthhrrrb.

AB: Amazing.

TH: That's the best case scenario, is that I'm just in the mood, it's not premediated and I feel like there's something that's like kind of channelled through me or something, it's like something calls out to me. Let's say you're at a pastry counter and there's a million things to choose from and one thing is like – MEE! You want me! You know, that's how my brain is, you know, I have so many ideas all the time, and I'll be like oooooohhh – it's calling my name here. And it's like a relationship I have with that idea where I start without knowing what the outcome will be and then see what turns out, and oftentimes, that's the fun of it, it's like not planning ahead – it's just starting and see what happens. And in that way, I feel like the spontaneity of the original painting is really captured on the canvas so it's not something that I plan ahead of time. And then I usually go back in a little later and add in some more realistic details but the energy of the original impulse is something that I try to capture.

AB: Fantastic, so it's a really intuitive process.

TH: Exactly, yeah.

AB: Amazing.

TH: And I feel like sometimes that I'm sort of channelling some energy that's beyond me. I am sure it comes from me to some extent but I just try to channel whatever energy that is and have like a good relationship with it, so it's like – oh, yeah! We're going there, we're going there! It's like: Hey, wanna go to a dance party? Yeah! Just like engaging, I guess, with the energy. Sometimes it feels like it's coming from some place, not even just from me.

AB: So in some cases, it's more the idea is taking you along for the ride, rather than you being at the wheel.

TH: Exactly! Yeah, and I think that's really fun, and a very vulnerable but intimate, cool place to be with the work. So I think it stays fresh in that way.

AB: Of course.

TH: A lot of artists do the same things over and over again, and I'm like always keen to try something new and be experimental, and throw it out the window if it doesn't work. So yeah, try to keep it fresh.

AB: The idea of risk and going down paths you haven't been down before.

TH: Exactly.

AB: And you use a lot of motifs in your work. In this show in particular you have giant corncocks, you have the snakes, you have a lot of reoccurring, very bold colours. I'm

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wondering if you can talk a bit more about what those things mean both conceptually and aesthetically to your work?

TH: Yes, yes. So, oftentimes, I'll take a symbol and then translate in many different ways, so it maybe doesn't always mean the same thing so in each situation, it might have a little different translation, which to me is a really interesting... say for instance, the serpent shapes or the snake – those have gone throughout the show in different formats and I think of them symbolically – obviously, there not actually about snakes, and I actually don't even care about snakes or like snakes, like real snakes.

AB: Right

TH: But as an archetypal symbol that's more of a shape too, that's as much of a, like, visual symbol as a metaphoric or historical symbol that I am referencing, it's like, kind of like a wave pattern that I like – or like the movement of a snake to me is representative of a certain kind of like, amorphic – you know – organic movement, I guess, is what I am trying to say. Also to me, it can be symbolic of energy, so like the movement of energy between things. It also can be a phallic symbol, and it can also reference Adam and Eve in some sort of archetypal, historical way. So it really depends on the situation and how I am interpreting each symbol. I like the continuation like as a flow-through between each of the works, to have some repeated elements, so it makes the work kind of talk to itself, and becomes more of a cohesive element, like, that bonds the show together.

AB: Right

TH: You also brought up the corncobs, which is a repeated element here. And so I use that in the opera as a symbol of power, but it's like a phallic symbol, but it's a female phallic symbol. Like a corn is actually – when we think of the corncob, it's the female, it's the flower version, the female version of the corn, where the tassels are the males. So it's the phallic female, is what I'm saying.

AB: I see.

TH: And to make it gold turns it into a kind of like money, or like a powerful, like...

AB: Right.

TH: ...it's also a dildo in a way, it's like a disembodied phallic symbol, so it's a phallic symbol, but it's totally taken away from the male power and given to the female power. And also a symbol, not only, not money so much but just like, like when the golden whores they are asking for the golden corn, they are not asking for a penis...

AB: Right.

TH: They're like, no leave the penis, we just want to the golden corn...

AB: More like the power?

TH: Yeah, exactly...yeah, in fact they're like 'we're queer!'. It's more of a lesbian sexing, so...but in that case, that's what the corn means. In other iterations, the corn can also mean,

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like a Southern decoration motif that refers to rustic living, and an idealised kind of farmer lifestyle. So it really just depends on the piece.

AB: Ok, ok. But like you say, it kind of builds a cohesion throughout the show, and that was one of the things I wanted to pick up on because the work we're sitting in is new to the show, or at least the installation is new to the show, the opera is obviously the commission but a lot of the other works are from 2018 or from a different era, I suppose, and yet the show feels very coherent. There's these narratives that seem to run through. So I am wondering how these works came together in your mind, in this space, and how you built these threads through for the viewer to follow.

TH: Right, ok. Again, it was a bit intuitive and the works that were selected for the show kind of played upon themselves, so there was kind of like a conversation that happened within the works, and then I just kind of went with that, and explored that more fully, like for instance we have these sex dolls and these kind of like figures that are like a disembodied – like they have no power, these ladies here. So like embracing the idea of a mannequin to me was kind of – oh well, yes, kind of similar. It's like a weird doll, it's lifeless and has no power and is like a stand in for a human, but it's like creepy. So it's like to me, I just sort of like; of yeah, well this kind of goes with this, and... the sex dolls, I guess they have like a giant hole in their mouth, and it's the same for the golden tunnel, so the ladies that are carved onto the golden tunnel you know, they have these huge mouths, and then the huge mouths refer to the tunnel itself – like the hole in the tunnel. So I'm just kind of playing with what's there and exploring it more fully, I guess. Also when I made the golden tunnel wall, I wasn't thinking about the mouths being like an opera singer open-mouth, but once I was asked to do it, you know, do the opera, I was like, oh well, they're singing. You know, they're not just sex dolls, they're also OOOAAHHH – singing! So – I think things just get layered on itself, like one thing leads to another.

AB: That makes sense.

TH: Yeah, and one idea leads to another. So I will not always work with corncobs and snakes, but I think for this exhibition like, I love that as being something that ties it together.

AB: Right, that was kind of the appropriate motif for this presentation.

TH: Right, exactly.

AB: Great. Ok, I've just got one more question. And it's something – it relates to something that I was struck by you saying – you said it in a couple of interviews that I've read. And it's about this idea that your work isn't about you. Or that you take yourself out of the work as much as possible. And I find this idea really intriguing because you are such a hands-on artist, and you're so involved in the process of making and - it obviously – you make the work, it resonates from you – so what do you mean by this idea of removing yourself from the work, or the work not being about you. And why is it important for you to reiterate that?

TH: Very good question, and very observant of you to notice that. So I would say that goes back to originally, as an early on artist I was doing a lot of performance work. So, live performance myself...

AB: With yourself, ok.

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TH: And then I would do videos where I was the main character, and a lot of that was misconstrued I would say...

AB: Yeah.

TH: Like the characters I was portraying, people though they were me, like I was portraying some sort of aspect of myself...

AB: Oh I see, yeah.

TH: ...or that it was me trying to show off, like you know – if I played like a pretty woman, they would be like ‘oh you’re just trying to be a pretty woman’, and I was like ‘no no no’. I’m trying to – I’m not a princess, I am not trying to be a princess. This is just an archetype that I’m playing upon. So I think that comes almost from my frustration on feeling early on being misunderstood in terms of like, I thought of my work as being more like a Cindy Sherman style of like – I’m portraying these archetypes or ways that women are portrayed oftentimes, but instead, they would be like ‘hmm, what does this mean about you, this must be biographical’. And honestly, I think that happens more often to women, and hopefully that’s changing, but like in men’s work, it tends to be read as ‘oh yeah, this is like an intellectual idea you’re portraying’ with a woman, it’s like ‘oh this must be biographical and personal to you’. So I think that’s partly just my defence, being defensive in separating. But I would say that like, if you’re going – we’ll talk about the opera. So we have like these whores that are hedonistic and all about showing off and being full of themselves and super sexualised, and then we have this like, more austere, more holy women, who are kind of full of themselves and righteous in a different way. Like if someone is going to say, ‘oh, which one are you, Trulee?’; it’s like ridiculous, right?

I want to be free to create these characters where I am not going to be portrayed as being one or the other. In fact, I think we all have aspects of, you know, really dualistic sides of ourselves that are a part of a whole. So I just don’t want it to be read as ‘oh, this video is about a nightmare, she must have had a bad nightmare’, or ‘she must have had a traumatic childhood thinking about monsters’ or whatever, which is like not true, I’m just trying to think about like what would be like a cultural archetype or some sort of symbolic way to describe fear, or – do you know what I mean?

AB: Absolutely.

TH: So separating myself from that, which, again, I think is maybe just being slightly defensive but it’s like I want people to view the work as being an idea or a symbol for some larger conversation.

AB: Of course, so you want them to see past you, in a way, to something that’s about the wider world on a whole?

TH: Right, exactly.

AB: That makes a lot of sense.

TH: Very good question.

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AB: Alright, well thank you, Trulee. It's been great to speak to you and hopefully that's given our future viewers a bit of an idea about the work and the show and hopefully everybody will have a chance to come and see it.

TH: Right, I hope you will come and see it! Thank you so much for having me, this has been really fun.

AB: Great.