



ZABLUDOWICZ
COLLECTION

Invites

ROSIE
GIBBENS

1 JULY–
15 AUGUST 2021

Paul Luckraft: I wanted to start by talking about the title of the show, *Soft Girls*. Where did that title come from and how does it relate to the sculptural entities in the space? Who are the 'soft girls'?

Rosie Gibbens: The sculptures are the 'soft girls' because they're squishy and their skin is fabric. But I was also thinking about the 'Soft Girl' internet aesthetic. It's a hyper-feminised cute look: pastels, lots of freckles. It is clichéd femininity taken so far that it appears ironic. These girls are playing with their identity around that stereotype and being irreverent towards it. That's also something I do in my work.

PL: Your sculptures are far from being just cutesy, aren't they? Innards and organs are exposed; there's a certain violence. Could you talk a bit about another key reference you've been examining, the Anatomical Venus models of eighteenth-century Italy?

RG: I became interested in the Anatomical Venus when I read a book by Joanna Ebenstein [*The Anatomical Venus: Wax, God, Death & the Ecstatic*]. I was drawn to the bizarre and morbid beauty of these languid women whose insides are exploding out of them. I love their mix of glamour and the grotesque. They are absurd in all their strange details – they have real hair, some wear pearl necklaces, they lie on silk pillows – which seem so unnecessary to their practical purpose as anatomical figures. They represent this amazing mix of sex, death, religion and science: four things that often seem at odds with each other, but in these objects they make sense.

I was also interested in the way their poses are referential to art history; they speak about the positioning of the nude in the past and how this influences the way female bodies are read today. They began as revered objects but eventually became sideshow displays, where their scientific and artistic qualities became an excuse for titillation. To me, they feel like precursors to the inert sex dolls of today.

PL: What role does the horrific, or horror as a genre, play in your practice?

RG: This show has been very influenced by body horror. In the *Hellraiser* films there are characters called Cenobites who have similarities to the Anatomical Venuses; they have open wounds with their insides coming out, but they still have real agency and power. I saw these horror characters as the Anatomical Venuses come to life to seek revenge, or to be in a position where they are no longer just to be looked at, either desired or pitied, but something to be impressed by and afraid of. Many of the aesthetic choices in the show were taken from the Cenobite costumes.

PL: Can I ask about the cartoon aesthetic as well? Some of the sculptures in the space reference the Looney Tunes era of the 1940s and 50s. How does this relate to the anatomical?

RG: Things happen to those Looney Tunes bodies that would be terrifying to see happen to someone in real life. Like when their eyes are hanging out of their head and getting tangled up. Cartoons allow us to think about our body's vulnerability in a way that isn't horrifying.

PL: The huge lolling tongue is quite a feature in the show. It seems both materially softer but also less threatening than some of the other pieces.

RG: I was thinking about the cartoon representation of desire. When a character sees something they like – often a female cartoon character – their eyes bounce out of their head and their tongue unrolls. The eyes in the room look at all the other sculptures and respond to their performances, being aroused or disgusted by them.

PL: Perhaps this is a good point to talk about performance, which is a central part of your practice. This show takes the form of a sculptural installation, with a video of you performing as part of it. How have you come to structure your performances in relation to objects?

RG: It's developed bit by bit. When I was first making performances, I imagined myself as a kind of puppet master, allowing everyday objects to come alive and to have a use other than what they were designed for. As the performances got more complicated, with more objects and me making more things, I began creating worlds for the objects to live in. Those worlds weren't necessarily visually constructed but were built in my mind through a perverse internal logic. The performances are a chain reaction: when I do one thing, it encourages something else in response. All the sculptures have personalities and goals in my mind too, and performing with them helps to reveal these.

PL: In this show there are a lot of home gadgets, from strange exercise gizmos to sex toys. How do you select the particular objects you use? Is it for their function or their look?

RG: Their function, primarily. I like things that have a very niche use: for example, a device for taking the top off an egg when you could just use a spoon. I also like objects that don't really work – like for example the vibrating plate exerciser, which I'm pretty sure doesn't really make you lose weight. These things are sold as ways to improve your body or everyday routines, but they can actually make your life more complicated and frustrating.

PL: And cluttered.

RG: Yeah. I'm interested in all the weird items that humans have designed in order to market them to other people.

PL: Although the sculptures can move – some on pulleys, others on wheels – it's not as if you're setting up an interactive space for the viewer. Am I right in thinking that the video is key in activating the sculptures for your audience? Can you also describe how you position your own body in relation to the objects that you create? It feels to me that you stage your actions only to then take on a passive role.

RG: Yes, the video as well as the public performance are necessary in activating the sculptural works. They come to life through my engagement, I set up a system in which I can place myself in, then something will happen to me, but I'm always in control. Everything I've made I see as an extension of myself, so the idea that I'm the passive one is not necessarily true. There's a kind of symbiotic quality between me and the objects, just as tools become extensions of our bodies.

PL: Could you talk about the materials you used to make the 'soft girls'?

RG: This was a development for me: I've become much more conscious of my materials, shapes, textures and colours than I was before. I have been making soft sculptures for a while, but I was using printed photographs of my body parts, so the shape was defined by whether it was a leg, a lip, etc. Here I've been more careful about creating silhouettes that are exaggerated rather than purely representative of the shape of a body. I've also tried to be aware of the fabrics I'm using, and their associations. For example, there's lots of gingham, which has a cutesy (soft girl) quality, but it's contrasted with PVC and pleather, which reference fetish gear.

PL: Are there any particular artists you've been looking at recently who have inspired you?

RG: Yeah, a lot. Helen Chadwick's work has been incredibly influential – the way she combines the luxurious and glamorous with something that's abject is really amazing. And then there are loads of artists who work with fabric, such as Tau Lewis, Penny Goring, Rose Nestler, Jonathan Baldock, Dorothea Tanning and Louise Bourgeois. They've helped me think about pattern cutting and how to make 3D forms. I also love Mika Rottenberg, Shana Moulton and Rebecca Moss – in their videos they often have a kind of pointless or anti-climactic end goal, which really excites me.

PL: Finally, I want to ask about the darker seam your work connects to, particularly the power imbalances of the gaze on the feminine body.

RG: Though my work has humorous elements, I think it marries dark and light. A lot of the work I do has as its starting point

something in a culture that makes me uncomfortable or unsettled and I'm trying to navigate my feelings about it. With this show, I was thinking a lot about the proliferation of the 'passive victim' or 'maiden' trope throughout the history of art and culture and across various forms of media. Edgar Allen Poe said: 'The death [...] of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world', which is a pretty violent statement. This mindset trickles through our cultural psyche and affects identity construction. The Anatomical Venus partly represented this for me in the way it combines the nudes of art history, horror movies, sex dolls, and true crime victims all at once. With *Soft Girls*, I want to use absurdity to give new life to these objectified bodies and gently mock archetypal depictions of gender and sexuality.

Artist's presentation: Saturday 17 July, from 3pm
Please check website for further details.

Rosie Gibbens (b.1993, UK) received an MA from the Royal College of Art in Contemporary Art Practice: Performance and a BA in Performance Design and Practice at Central Saint Martins. Selected group exhibitions include: *The Artist is Online*, König Gallery, Berlin (2021); *Hot Air*, Bad Art presents, London (2021); *Recreational Grounds*, Thames-Side Studios Gallery, London (2021); *Ridiculous*, Elephant West, London (2020); *Antisocial Isolation*, Saatchi Gallery, London (2020); *Salon Acme*, Mexico City (2020); *Absinthe 3*, Collective Ending, London (2019); *Slow Sunday*, Steakhouse Live, London (2018); *Learn Where the Meat Comes From*, out_sight Gallery, Seoul (2018); *Revolve Performance Festival*, Uppsala, Sweden (2018).

Zabludowicz Collection Invites is dedicated to solo presentations by UK-based artists who do not currently have representation by a UK commercial gallery.

Image: *Death Becomes Her*, 2021. Digital collage.
Courtesy the artist.

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London NW5 3PT

Opening times

Thursday–Sunday, 12–6pm

Other times by appointment

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