

# BEATRICE MARCHI

BY ATTILIA FATTORI  
FRANCHINI

“It seems plausible that folly and fools, like religion and magic, meet some deeply rooted needs in human society.”

Peter Berger

Pepa, the main character of *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (1988), a black-comedy drama by Spanish Director Pedro Almodóvar, works as a voiceover actor who dubs foreign films. When her lover Ivan, a voiceover colleague, leaves her, a web of absurd interconnected events unfolds exploring larger themes of womanhood, love, identity. The film plot takes its starting point from the French play *The Human Voice* (*La voix humaine*, 1930) by Jean Cocteau, evolving over a series of phone calls made by a desperate woman in the ultimate attempt to avoid being dismissed by her lover.

The identificatory element of the voice is central to the film’s narrative as main repository of a mediated self. Pepa’s capacity of assuming many personalities through her voice, acting other stories, moods and sentiments, stands in neat contrast with the tragicomic events unfolding in her personal life. Internal thoughts and external behaviors are portrayed as distant, in flux between mediation and experience, to observe the complexity of the female condition.

I was reminded of this particular film when thinking about Beatrice Marchi’s practice and its predisposition towards mutation and adaptation, to represent multiple versions of femininity.

Beatrice Marchi was born in the Italian Northern province of Gallarate, in 1986, but

now lives between Milan and Hamburg, where she is finishing a Masters at Hochschule für Bildende Künste (HFBK). Her practice revolves around the personal issues of being a woman, born in a traditionalist country, Italy, and a practicing artist. The intersection between these definitory characteristics and a subjective approach to their exploration, allows Marchi to enquire each of these positions in a larger sense, offering a sharp commentary on gender stereotypes, localism and the question of professionalization in art and life.

Spanning across drawing, painting, sculpture, animation, sound and performance, Marchi’s work has a camp attitude. It does not respond to any medium specificity, but it takes form according to the socio-cultural context it portrays. Often having an improvised or low-fi outlook, the characters Marchi constructs and personally performs are ambiguous, punctuated by irony, but also open to change and interpretation. As a young Cindy Sherman, interested in placing herself at the center of transformation and portraiture, we have seen Marchi taking the traits of a captivating mermaid, improvised porn star, a cappella singer, representing eroticism through drawings or embodying the sad *Loredana*, struggling to communicate in a device oriented digital world. Withdrawn from stereotypical male fantasies and imagination, but performed as clumsy and hampered, the queer *femmes* Marchi interprets are somehow funny, indulging in imperfection rather than portraying a Kardashian post-produced look.

A direct reference to the classical figure





of the clown, imagined here as female, can be made. The clown, representing duality (laugh/cry) in a single mask, is the beholder of a subverted truth but also that eccentric figure engaging in improvised difficult activities she has no competence for, inviting members of the public, as Marchi does with her friends and family, to participate. This collective improvisation—as the audio work *Never Be My Friend* (2014) sang in falsetto by the artist's male peers, or the performance *Non conosco nessuno (Isa B. '14)* (2016), made in collaboration with the artist's young cousin, another long term creative accomplice of Marchi's projects—are all an exercise into what we can call an attitude towards “de-professionalization” activating unexpected elements and fragilities through comedy.

In the project *Susy Culinski & friends* (2015), Marchi created the fictional character of Susy Culinski (an Italian linguistic joke for ass) to invite a series of Italian and international female artists she admired to submit a drawing about sex. Each response had to be made on a white A4 sheet of paper, forbidding the use of any digital element, putting emphasis on the hand as erotic tool. Susy is a wide-eyed ass, depicted in all sort of activities, from eating an ice-cream to brushing her eyelashes, provocative and capricious in her innocence. Premiered in its first iteration at Fantaspazio, in Milan (2016), and composed of thirty-eight contributions displayed as a theatrical installation, *Susy Culinski & friends* materialized as a layered and fanciful depiction of eroticism. The peculiarity of the theme has made the project also a critical platform for connection and conversation whilst emerging as an exercise in imagination and actuation.

For her first solo presentation in the US at Hester, New York, titled *Summer in the North with Loredana* (2017), Marchi concentrates themes of her research into the melancholic and self-reflective character of Loredana. Loredana, crustacean claws instead of arms, is depicted throughout the evolution of sea-

sons, showing anew mental and physical states and cycles. On the opening night, the performance *Concerto con Loredana* sees a timid Marchi-as-Loredana wearing pink sculptural versions of the claws, left afterwards in the gallery as an invite to the public to identify with the portrayed subject.

And it is through these contingent yet fluid formats that Marchi express depth. *Amiche forever* (2017) sees the protagonist Skyping on a tablet with an ass-face friend speaking only in native Italian, maybe Susy Culinski herself? The conversation revolves around themes of friendship and internationalization of culture. The ass blames Loredana for her BFF obsession, revealing insecurities about relationships in the digital era. Loredana, embracing English, only shouts to a fed up ass “I want to be free, I want to be international.” A sour laugh emerges from both characters, reflecting larger themes of discussion within the Italian contemporary scene.

Two pastel and acrylic paintings on wooden boards bring us back to the themes of embodiment, transformation, landscape and seasons. *F/N 2016 (in black)* (2016) showcases a ghostly Loredana, the body meshing with the mountany dark background, her traits as an extension of the haunting landscape. In *Summer in the North* (2016), as a proficient contortionist, Loredana transforms in a *ouroboros*, directly facing her ass. Eyes on each buttocks, and a mouth as vulva, we notice stream of tears running through the face and the ass, each crying about recognizing their own condition.

New and returning characters, long term muses and collaborators populate the fanciful universe of Beatrice Marchi, meshing the personal and the fictional until that sense of familiarity penetrates even the first-time spectator converting it into a collective tool for catharsis.

F/N 2016 (in black), 2016 (detail) Photo: Fran Parente (opposite page) Autoritratto, 2016 (p. 171) Summer in the North, 2016 Photo: Fran Parente (pp. 172-173) All images Courtesy: the artist and Downs & Ross, New York

