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Exclusive Interview: Harma Heikens Explores Taboos in "All Is Fair in Love and War" at KochxBos

by Nastia Voynovskaya Posted on September 11, 2014

Dutch artist Harma Heikens (featured in HF Vol. 13) is not afraid to use loaded imagery. Her upcoming show at KochxBos Gallery in Amsterdam, "All Is Fair in Love and War," toes the line between provocative and profane with a new series of confrontational, human-scale sculptures that touch upon taboo themes such as sexual abuse, violence, media saturation, hate groups and religion. The exhibition coincides with the release of her new book *Sculptures*, which features a foreword by Hi-Fructose co-editor-in-chief Annie Owens.

Though Heikens's works primarily feature children, the characters are hardly childlike. Instead they serve as guides for viewers to navigate the often difficult terrain of social and political issues that Heikens leaves for us to inspect. With all the hot-button topics her sculptures allude to, one's first impulse is to attempt to crack the code and deduce a definitive message. But Heikens doesn't make it that easy. As you will read in the interview below, she prefers not to prescribe her viewers' experiences but rather let the imagery linger until chills creep up their spines. Before "All is Fair in Love and War" opens on September 20, we spoke with Heikens about the complex layers of meaning in her new body of work.

How did you choose the title "All Is Fair in Love and War" for your exhibition?

Most sculptures in the exhibition deal with either love or war, so the phrase seemed to cover the territory, but I chose it mainly because it's such a dubious statement, implying the end justifies all means.

In the case of war it's only true by definition — a situation in which all moral standards are overthrown in favor of a bigger cause we tend to call war, and in the case of love it seems pretty contradictory that everything standing in its way should be eliminated inconsiderately. So I chose it because I don't agree, and hope the audience will also detect some discrepancy between the title and the work shown.

When we last featured you in Hi-Fructose Vol. 13, you discussed the ways your works reflect real-world problems, especially ones that affect children. Your previous pieces have spoken out about child soldiers and sex trafficking. Are there issues close to your heart that you are expressing in your latest body of work?

The never ending economical and political crises the world seems to have plunged into, all the outbreaks of violence — they didn't pass me by unnoticed.

Do you believe art can motivate political action? Is this part of your intention as an artist?

I think art can surely attribute to motivating action, especially the less self-referential art forms like literature and cinema, but in respect to my own work, no, it's not my intention. The message would have to be clear, then, wouldn't it? I would have to point fingers. Not that I 'm avoiding to take a stance in my personal life but to me the very attraction of the visual arts lies in the fact that whatever looks like an incompatible contradiction in writing or speech, doesn't have to be so when captured visually. Something can be gruesome and attractive simultaneously. That's hardly a good starting point for political action.

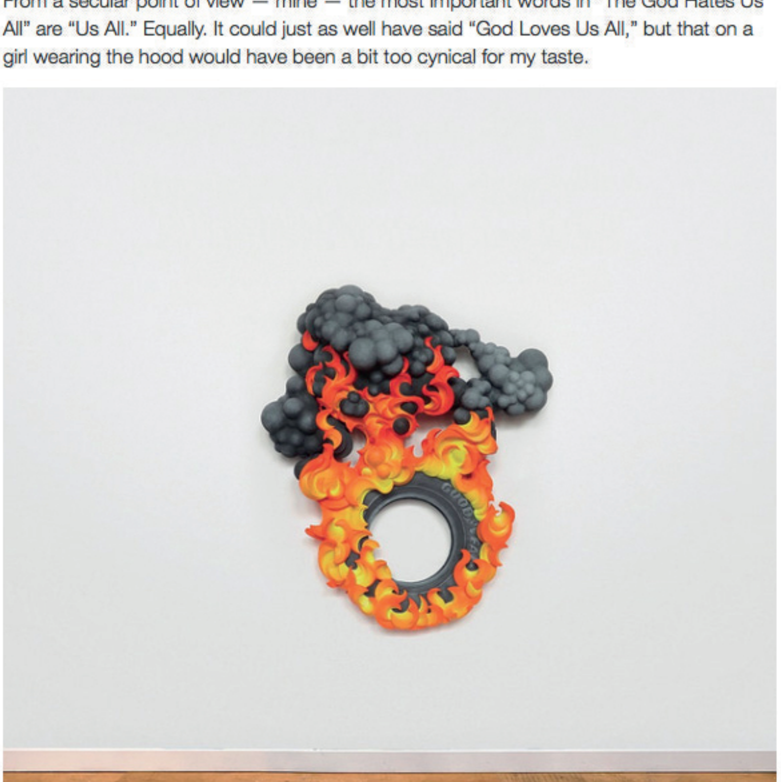
You often juxtapose childishness with sexuality. There's a particularly disturbing piece with the girl in the lamb mask wearing one high-heeled shoe and holding a dildo like an ear of corn. Maybe I've watched too many detective shows, but this one is particularly sinister. What was the thought process behind this piece?

It's creepy indeed. In risk of being over-explanatory; the key to the piece lies in what's going on between the lamb-girl and the maliciously smiling clown-figure on her side. It's an ambiguous and complex relationship. To me the scene is about domestic child abuse. Concealed as a life-size Biedermeier statuette.

I sense nihilism in *Trick or Treat*, the piece with the text "God Hates Us All." Yet, faced with the image of the child, I can't help but feel the conflicting emotions of hope for future generations and dread that we have left the world in a state of war and destruction for them. Are you warning your viewers about the repercussions of today's political climate?

You could put it like that. The girl is dressed up in a little KKK outfit, symbolizing self-righteous evil that can take on many disguises. It won't disappear by banning the costume, which has a long history. In Spain the hooded robes have been worn during Holy week since the middle ages. To U.S. tourists who are shocked by the similarity is often pointed out that the resemblance is totally coincidental, and that may well be so, but since the robes have been copied by the KKK, you can't help being reminded of the atrocities performed by the Roman Catholic church throughout history — even though the hoods were supposed to represent selflessness.

From a secular point of view — mine — the most important words in "The God Hates Us All" are "Us All." Equally. It could just as well have said "God Loves Us All," but that on a girl wearing the hood would have been a bit too cynical for my taste.



Though much of your work is focused on society and social interaction, the burning tire evokes the rampant environmental destruction perpetrated by many post-industrial countries. Was this a concern of yours when creating the piece?

I wasn't thinking of environmental destruction in the first place, but now that you mention it the connotation seems apparent. To me the burning tire represented popular revolt, the people's uprising against a corrupted power elite. There has been quite a bit of popular revolt lately, but unfortunately often associated with totalitarianism. Like the right-wing populist movements in Europe, and the religiously motivated violence in Africa and the Middle East.

I'm curious about your process. How much planning and preparation goes into making a sculpture?

I sometimes wish more energy would go into the planning, but in reality I can plan whatever I want, the sculpture seems to have a life of its own. It hardly ever turns out the way it was initially intended, but takes on form and meaning by working on it. Sometimes that's frustrating, but just visualizing what you already had in mind would be boring, I guess. Each piece takes three months. At least.

Your work has often been described as both endearing and disturbing. What do you hope viewers will take away from "All Is Fair in Love and War"?

That's a hard one. It implies some sort of a specific message that should come through. And the works in this exhibition are barely endearing, that's for sure. Basically I just hope the viewers enjoy the show.