

FORT GANSEVOORT

HYPERALLERGIC

An Army of Female Power Figures Stands Against Injustice

Vanessa German's show packs a punch, and is especially powerful in the context of the national politics of the past year.

Melissa Stern

November 17, 2016



Vanessa German, "The Boxer" (left) and "No Water Cleaner" (right) (all photos by the author for Hyperallergic)

There is an army of women amassed in Pavel Zoubok's gallery in Chelsea. They are ready to advance on the world, and look you in the eye with an unflinching gaze. They are armed with words, weapons, injured children, advertising slogans, cloth seashells, animals, beads, and much more. But mostly they are armed with a visual, artistic force that takes your breath away when you enter the gallery.

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Vanessa German, "Cream crackers" 74 x 23 x 36 inches

Entitled *i am armed. i am an army.*, Vanessa German's show packs a punch, and is especially powerful in the context of the national politics of the past year, where scores of injustices have been exposed. The exhibition is condensed from a larger one that debuted at the Wadsworth Atheneum earlier this year, with Zoubok presenting 21 of German's female figures, in quasi-military formation facing the rear of the gallery. A smaller side room is bathed in purple light, where figures, arranged in an oval, face wall-mounted mirrors that reflect back onto the sculptures, multiplying them into a hoard. The entire room glistens with moody light and a constant cacophony plays on a tape loop. There are snippets of song, conversation, and partially recognizable sounds. As German explained to me:

The sound is 17 layers of voice, memory, music, and root as sound; 3 rivers, the sound of a body dropping into water, a train, a water mill, Sam Cook, a list of women's names, my poetry, Porch songs, and more ... to create an immersive sensorium, to invoke and to evoke ... to bring into the room audible codes of healing, the audible codes of fear, discomfort, and movement ... transportation, cultural migration. Accessing the power of love sounds even, to add to the tactile environment of movement, urgency and accumulation.

This room of figures, light, and sound is an interesting counterpoint to the silent army, bathed in bold bright gallery light that waits outside.

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Installation view of Vanessa German's 'i am armed. i am an army.' at Pavel Zoubok Gallery

German is a multi-disciplinary artist, based in the Homewood section of Pittsburgh. Her work in slam poetry (my first exposure to her) has been featured on radio and in Ted Talks. She's a political activist who has made activism part of her work and daily life. Confronted by waves of neighborhood violence, she founded Love Front Porch and ARThouse, safe spaces devoted to art making and the children of her community. Her connection to both the political past and present are reflected keenly in the work in this show. Objects fabricated in the past 100 years in the US are intertwined with materials and imagery from across Africa. All of this is interwoven with the recent history of racially motivated murders in the US.

German draws on the Central African tradition of the *minkisi* (or *nkisi*) figure. Traditionally these are figures that are imbued with enormous power, derived from the profusion of objects that are hung in bundles onto and imbedded in the figure. They were created to communicate with ancestors and offer receptacles of hope and magic for the living. German filters this tradition through a distinctly 21st-century lens. Her female figures are modern power brokers, proudly carrying their history.

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Vanessa German, "sometimes i want to kill you," 74 x 25 x 22 inches

German starts with rubber doll parts that she assembles into standing figures. Using plaster, tar, and other materials, she molds each figure into an individual with distinct personality. The figures are scaled to be like oversized children, many sporting huge hairdos and headdresses that incorporate a myriad of found and fabricated objects. Some of these women are literally carrying the weight of the world on their heads. Cowrie shells are used for lips and each eye glimmers with a tiny rhinestone, giving the sculpture a "spark" of life. The brilliantly inventive combinations of objects — hundreds of old keys, ceramic knick-knacks, obsessively constructed bundles of fabric and yarn, bells, watches, old toys, and birds — are never randomly assembled but carefully arranged to further the narrative told in each piece. Upon first glance, this artistic world may appear chaotic, but then you see that there is extreme order to the work. The underlying message, to me, is that the structures of community and tradition carry us through hard times and triumphantly into the future.

A self-taught master of her craft, German's sculptures, above and beyond their political potency, are simply beautiful. The ability to take such an insanely disparate inventory of materials and join them together, not only coherently, but also seamlessly and with a perfect sense of design, form, and color is an achievement. That artistry, together with the importance and immediacy of the content, grab you in the gut.

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Vanessa German, “i come to do a violence to the lies of ugly (left) and “this is what it looks like when you get real” (right)

While there are many striking images in this exhibition, two that are especially poignant are “easily removed and replaced for washing” and “this is what it looks like when you get real up close to it.” Two tall sculptures (77 and 80 inches, respectively) portray two of these “warrior” women, each carrying the figure of a limp child. One is a cheerfully dressed rubber doll, originally white skinned, now painted black, and the other is a fabricated figure with a face that riffs on Central-African sculpture. It is not a child’s face but that of a small adult. It’s chilling.

I first saw this exhibition before the election. I went to see it again afterwards, and experienced it even more profoundly. Through her work, German tells us that out of emotions of disappointment and anger a new army of resistance will arise. I left the gallery feeling empowered and energized. To quote German who of course says it best, “I grieve and I create. I reach out to my family and I make it my business to FEEL, to HEAR, to WITNESS, and to continue on in my life and in my creativity, as I find that the truest love and the truest healing in the act of Making Art and being with Art and Seeing and being inspired. I believe in the power of art, and I believe in the power of Love, and I do not necessarily have to distinguish between the two.”

Vanessa German’s i am armed, I am an army continues at Pavel Zoubok Gallery (531 West 26th Street, Chelsea, Manhattan) through November 30.