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ZOE LACCHEI

Interview by HANNAH STOUFFER // Assisted by MONA PALMER

Portrait by SIMIAN PANOFSKY

ZOE LACCHEI'S WORK CAME TO ME BY ACCIDENT, OR PERHAPS BY FATE. I FIRST STUMBLED UPON HER COLLECTION OF PORTRAITS OF MARILYN MANSON—THIRTEEN GRAPHIC, GORY, STYLIZED PROFILES OF THE ARTIST—AS WELL AS HER GEISHA SERIES AND WAS IMMEDIATELY INTRIGUED. THEN, COMING ACROSS HER PROVOCATIVE ILLUSTRATIONS OF LUSTFUL YOUNG FEMALES INTERMINGLING WITH THE ANIMAL KINGDOM, SOME BORDERING ON BESTIALITY, I FELL IN LOVE. VISUALLY COMPELLING AND EXQUISITELY RENDERED, ZOE'S WORK IS EXCITING IN AN EXPERIENTIAL WAY, LIKE A NEW INTIMATE ENCOUNTER.

It isn't just alluring because of her gorgeous models and muses so dark, enigmatic, and rich with eloquent heartfelt imagery. You can see it in their eyes. And so I contacted Zoe, only to find that behind this deeply risqué work is a sweetly macabre and passionate girl, living in Rome, dedicating her life to creating it. That only made me love it (her) more. —*Hannah Stouffer*

Hannah Stouffer: So, after all of the depictions of vastly different settings, eras and characters in your work, where is your favorite place to be in the entire world?

Zoe Lacchei: In Japan, without a doubt. It would be hard for me to choose between Tokyo and Kyoto because both represent the complexity and dichotomy of Japanese culture. For me, Tokyo is like Neverland—an incredible and faraway place to lose yourself and satisfy all your desires in. Kyoto, on the other hand, represents the perfect abode for the soul and for culture. A sacred and unaltered place that is and will always be perfect.

Tell me about your *Geisha* series. How did your love affair with Japan and Japanese culture first start?

The complexity of the Japanese culture has always fascinated me, and everything started during my adolescence when reading manga and anime, moving on to more refined things as I grew older. A whole lifetime wouldn't be enough to fully understand Japan, and a life spent doing it would not be wasted. My *Geisha* project became famous, especially in the world of tattoos; but I think that my Western take on such a mysterious world could have been sometimes seen as disrespectful. Obviously I wanted to use the image of the geisha as a symbol of mystery, exaltation of beauty and perfection, but I have learned that one must be careful and tread softly when dealing with such a codified and inaccessible world.

Define your childhood in three words.

Isolated. Misunderstood. Solitary.

What kind of effect did growing up in a small town have on your work?

The place where I grew up was small, religious, and quite

ONE

I started my career drawing pornographic comics.

TWO

I collect dead things.

THREE

I have a bad relationship with keys and locks. I often get locked in places on accident. I wonder what Freud would think of that.

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The Dragon Lady

Mixed-media on paper
32 cm x 45 cm
2011





THE MORAL IS NOT EVERYTHING THAT SCARES US WANTS TO HURT US, BUT OFTEN WHAT WE ARE ATTRACTED TO CAN BE DANGEROUS.

Master of Temptation
2012

bigoted. I've been strange since my early days, and isolation only worsened my fantasies. I was always alone and didn't have friends, so I lived wandering around a park near my grandparents' house, observing animals and nature. In the same park was where I first saw an animal that had been dead for some time, and I've never been able to wash off the feeling of having finally understood that we are just "matter." I didn't know what I was going to be as an adult, and I continued being isolated into my adolescence but I'm not sad about it: isolation has made me who I am, and inside me there is a secret world that never makes me feel alone.

Do you remember your first encounter with art?
Or erotic art?

Art has always been a cornerstone in my family, but still my mother was very strict on what I could read or watch. She used to read a very peculiar magazine called *Frigidaire* that talked about great contemporary artists, writers, photographers, erotic strips and so on, but it really was too "adult" for me. I was only a child. Luckily though, I was often home alone, and so I had the chance to read it and admire its artists without anyone knowing. That magazine was the originator of my first questions, my first curiosities, and my first punishments. The bittersweet pleasure of the forbidden.

Let's talk about your work. How would you describe it to someone who has never seen it?

I often try to explain my work to those who have never seen it, and I always find it very complicated and embarrassing. My opinion is that the visual is not meant to be explained, and my work leaves plenty of space for different personal interpretations because it digs its roots right into what people feel when seeing it.

For some, what I do is disturbing, for others it's fascinating. When I want to cut it short, I say that I draw naked girls in anguishing situations. If I want to be intellectual I say that with my female subjects I express the perversion of what is human, and with the animals I communicate the purity and perfection of nature. In my work the innocent ones are always the animals while my beautiful and young models often have sadistic or

violent intentions.

Have you encountered individuals that find your work controversial?

A work becomes controversial when the spectator has a limited background, a scarce understanding of the visual language or a mediocre sensitivity. People often misinterpret the intent and the messages behind my works, but that's part of the game. And being considered controversial is always better than being boring.

In your most recent series, *Sketches of a Dangerous Mind*, it appears you are going back to a simpler palette, or different technique, am I correct?

I believe that changing palettes has been a good choice to express myself better. Now, in black and white, not only can I better illustrate the volume and the depth of what I draw, but I also feel I got rid of something useless—the color, which distracted both me and the viewer. The technique is still the same because I pile up many layers of graphite, but the result is more compact.

What was the purpose of this series, and where did you gain inspiration for it?

The basic idea is to send simple, shocking and quick messages to those who are looking. The title of the works can either help to understand a hidden meaning or it can be a word game. After my *Geisha* project I tried other little series, but I was unsatisfied because I felt I wasn't able to express myself. Often in artistic contexts, you might find that you "must" depict yourself over and over, always representing those things that make yourself recognizable. What I've always wanted to do was to give a strong message, to offer something to think about, without having the spectator feel as if he or she was being fooled by the typical boring representation of a naked body. I often work on sketches that I can't complete because the emotional response of the public or the gallery owners might not be positive, but in the title of this series there's a sort of warning: It's like going to a haunted house in an amusement park... there's the risk of getting frightened.

I SEE EROTICISM AS THE SECRET SCENERY BEHIND EVERYONE'S LIFE, AND I LIKE THE FACT THAT IT'S A UNIVERSAL CONCEPT BUT PERSONAL AT THE SAME TIME.

What types of imagery do you turn to for inspiration?

Since I'm Italian and I live in Rome, the religious element is impossible to hide, not really as a form of inspiration, but for the emotional influence that it had on my childhood. Growing up surrounded by the celebration of bloody images of saints and martyrs really made a difference in helping me appreciate what a marvelous thing it is when high aesthetics are combined with brutality. You can show horrible things if you put them in the right baroque frame. I love animals and the human anatomy, and love to reproduce them in a realistic way, because nature is perfect and I like to celebrate its beauty. A big part of what I do is steeped in traditional and pop Japanese culture: from photography to shunga illustrations, manga to video games, the aesthetics of street fashion to the ero-guro movement.

Do you look at very many erotic references? What is your favorite kind?

I see eroticism as the secret scenery behind everyone's life, and I like the fact that it's a universal concept but personal at the same time when it comes to taste. I like to play with hints of the erotic imaginary more than creating something extraordinary, and I don't believe in vulgarity because it only lives in the eyes of the puritans. Being in love with all that is disturbing and subject to a strong fascination with Japanese culture, I believe "Lolitas" to be my strongest attraction. That strange transition from childhood to adolescence that makes teenagers a dangerous object of desire. Having said this, I always try to avoid working with models who are too young or with little girls if the context is too erotic, because I don't love to exaggerate by creating a forced image; and I don't like to give rise to dangerous paradoxes unless they can be useful to send a specific message.

Do you use models or photographs to help create your work?

I use my models and photographs in an unconventional way. I work with a small number of models but choose them carefully according to the feeling that I want to convey, and they have no idea how I'm going to use their

image. Our collaboration is based on the fact that I have their consent to use their image without actually having a direct collaboration. I absorb the physical traits that make a person unique, and therefore I manage to create my own three dimensional image of this person without having her in front of me. In other words, I portray the model that inspires me not by looking at a photo, because I find this impersonal and useless, but thanks to my technique of filtering the image of the girl through myself and my own imagination. The final result is that the model is absolutely recognizable, but the paradox is that often she'll also look like me. Part of this process is caused by the fact that all artists depict themselves, or the idealization of themselves.

All my "little muses" are real girls, that for work or fun, have accepted to work with me. They are "normal" girls, but have an incredible beauty and strike me because each one is able to give out very different feelings with her eyes. It's like having five beautiful dolls that I can dress (or undress) as I please, to make them act the roles that I have in my mind. At the end of the day it seems that they are useful to help me express my childish side.

Define what you believe to be the most beautiful (or sexiest) part about women.

I like all women very much. I don't think there is anything more beautiful on earth than a naked woman's body, but through the years I have started to separate the concepts of beauty and sensuality. In the end, I've understood that the way in which you live and love your own body is what makes it sensual, and the beauty of a woman is only a part of the game. What I mean is that the sexiest part of a woman is her gaze and what she is able to communicate to you before getting naked. At the end of it all, I think that this is what you could call seduction.

What is your favorite piece of erotica (film, print, or digital) that you have come across, in terms of visual inspiration?

"Arakimentari!" Nobuyoshi Araki is the photographer that has influenced my work the most, the only one who's ever been able to make me laugh, cry or turn me on only

The Waiting
2012





THE FINAL RESULT IS THAT THE MODEL
IS ABSOLUTELY RECOGNIZABLE, BUT THE PARADOX
IS THAT OFTEN SHE'LL ALSO LOOK LIKE ME.

Madame La Guillotine
2012

through images. Despite the differences in our tools, we are both inspired by the same three great archetypes: life, death, sex. I watch that documentary every morning before getting to work; it's like a mantra I repeat visually.

Favorite part of the human anatomy to draw?

It's a tie between breasts and hands.

What is your process in choosing the animals you depict in your work? What about when you combine them in compositions with women?

The concept of dichotomy is always present in my work: life and death, sex and death, beauty and disgust and so on. Often I use animals to represent the "positive" part, while the morbid and violent aspects are shown with female figures. I pick unusual, unpleasant or ugly animals in contrast with the beauty of women, and I choose cute and defenseless ones when I know they'll face a terrible death. Sometimes they can also be beautiful and majestic animals like swans that reveal their true, brutal being. The moral is not everything that scares us wants to hurt us, but often what we are attracted to can be dangerous.

So, do you choose specific animals based on their sensual appeal or connotations?

I really like to exploit the looks and characteristics of the animals I pick, and if some of these also hide a sexual meaning, I'm even happier to portray them. I've always had a strange fascination with the eyes of goats, with their horizontal pupils, and I don't think Satan being represented as a black he-goat is a coincidence. Therefore when I worked on my *Master of Temptation*, I took advantage of all the possible religious and sexual implications. Another example is *Vicious Lovers*—I particularly hate swans, and I never depict them in a positive way, but I prefer to underscore their violent and obscure aspects.

What are your favorite materials to work with in your illustrations?

I used to work with mixed media on paper based on the stratification of colors. The final result was singular but also very stressful, and sometimes it set strong limits. Recently I've changed materials and am now working in black and white, using only micro graphite and recycled paper. I've always loved working on paper because it allows me to have a strong handle on the strokes and to keep more high quality details.

Are there any artists with whom you would love to collaborate?

Collaboration is a big word, because all the artists I admire the most are reserved and isolated people like me. The ones that I admire and feel closest to are: Nobuyoshi Araki, Saturno Buttò and Michael Hussar. I'm a lucky girl because I have a good relationship with the last two, but I keep missing Nobuyoshi Araki. I would ask him what I asked the other two: Could I possibly silently sit in a corner and watch you work? This would be better than a thousand collaborations.

What sort of plans or projects do you have coming up in the near future?

Living in Italy is starting to become a serious limitation for my job, so at the beginning of 2013 I'll move to Los Angeles and then to Tokyo in order to give my work a chance of touring around the world a little.

Any guilty pleasures or indulgences you want to close with?

That's a whole other chapter that would need to be opened in order to have a satisfying answer... the whole magazine wouldn't be big enough!

For more information about Zoe Lacchei, visit ZoeLacchei.com

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