

ALTMAN SIEGEL

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REVS



KOAK

“I’ve come to view defiance as a tool.”

Text by RL. All works by KOAK.

Koak (b. 1981) is an artist currently based in San Francisco where she co-founded Alter Space gallery with her partner. In her works she combines chalk pastels with milk casein creating a visual language which reminds the viewer of old comics. Koak’s way of picturing the often curvy female figures in different situations is simultaneously cartoonishly exaggerated and brutally honest.

For the last eleven years, the artist has been working on a book called Sick Bed Blues, which has grown from a short comic into an epic fifteen hundred page trilogy. “In brief synopsis, it’s a pseudo auto-biography as told by animals living inside my body”, the artist tells.

“A dear friend once described it as Beatrix Potter as told by David Lynch.”

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How did you get into arts?

I've always been drawn to art as a form of expression, even as a young child. As I got older it became a critical form of communication for me.

I had a period in my life where it was very difficult to connect with people. Creating art was the most natural way for me to speak, it allowed me to communicate with other human beings and not feel like I was choking on my own voice.

Can you describe your working method? How do you create your works?

It's important for me to stay flexible in the ways I work. I want to keep myself on my toes and challenge the materials I use—sometimes through developing nonconventional ways of applying them. I think it's important to do this because it also challenges how the viewer experiences the work. Lately I've been making paintings that come from a process of combining chalk pastels with milk casein. The pastels are rubbed or brushed onto rag paper that's been mounted to wooden panels, resembling a canvas. It's a method that I've slowly developed over the last year and a half, and one that I'm drawn to because elementally it doesn't feel like anything else I've seen. I'm curious to see how some of the other media that were a part of my work in the past—such as textile, electronics, sculpture, VR, or animation—might start to creep into future works.

This issue of REVS is called 'Defiance'. What does the subject bring to your mind?

When I was younger I viewed defiance as an act of heroism. I think I idealized it as something that only people who fought for social justice or the heroines of great sci-fi novels were capable of. I think now, especially given our current social and political chaos, I see defiance as something much more subjective; a trait that's easily skewed to fit one's personal ideologies. In this way the concept of defiance has lost some of the magical qualities that it held for me in my youth; I've come to view defiance more as a tool than as an admirable trait.

If you could defy anything, what would it be?

Most definitely time.

What are your latest projects about? Can you tell what inspired them or how was the creation process?

Right now I'm working on a new series of paintings and drawings for two solo presentations in Miami this winter. The drawings are rooted in symbolism and domestic space. A window looking out is a portal to what's outside our reality—if we stand at it we are lost in desire or transfixed by what is beyond our understanding. However, a figure coming in through a window is an intruder: the dynamic quickly changes from a moment of longing into a moment of fear.

On a more personal level, I think that a couch is like Eden, a fictional paradise. My partner and I have been searching for the perfect couch for years, it feels like such an important thing to get right that we just continuously put it off. The couch, for me, is utopia. It's a space of leisure and relaxation that seems like it couldn't possibly exist in today's world.

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What's a thought that you've been touched by lately and would like to share with our readers?

I read this piece about women in the tech industry who, despite working in high positions, often feel like they don't belong or have trouble owning their authority. It's called the imposter syndrome.

I think this touched me because it's something I've often felt with my own work—that I don't belong, or that the act of me making something and calling it art is a form of trickery, a deception on my part. There's always this suspicion that someone might look at a painting and tell me with certainty that it's not actually a painting, and then a fear that I might believe them.

What makes you afraid and how do you overcome it?

When I was a child I would go on road trips with my grandparents, and my grandmother and I would pass a sheet of paper back and forth between the center divider and collectively create a drawing. She always drew angels. As she got older the angels looked like they were in a heat storm, a wavy oasis of a figure. I remember early on being terrified that at some point in my life, what I wanted my body to do and what it actually did might not align.

Now, I think (or at least I hope) that I'm a long way off from the moments when my body becomes defiant. Still, every time I start a new piece for a moment my hands forget how to draw. I don't know how to hold the pencil, I can't tell if the line I'm drawing is carving out or into the space. There's a constant push to remind myself that the fear and the not knowing are continually part of the process.

I think I've overcome this by using these moments of forgetting as a way to constantly relearn, to never allow myself to go on autopilot. If anything they've made me stronger because they've forced me to not get too comfortable.

Can you name people, moments or places that have strongly shaped you as an artist or inspired you?

When I was in my early 20's I knew a lot of people who felt like brick walls. They were these fortresses, impenetrable, unable to be hurt, and at the time I felt incredibly jealous. I felt like raw skin all the time, everything was a tender-belly when I wanted to be strong.

I told myself "you are going to learn to be like them," and I did. Brick by brick I tiled over myself, and eventually everything felt numb.

This experience had the largest effect on my art for two reasons. First, all those cut off feelings didn't just disappear, they needed somewhere to go, and the channel I had left open for them was art.

Secondly, as I got older it greatly shaped the type of work I wanted to make. I didn't want to make things that propagated disconnection. It felt really essential to create work that dealt with emotions, that reopened those uncomfortable doors, and that fostered the possibility of connecting to others.

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What do you think is the role of an artist in today's society?

Art plays too large of a role in society to have just one meaning. It has effects on all parts of our lives and therefore we need creative people taking on a variety of responsibilities.

For me, art as a solely commercial entity is boring and cold. The idea of people making soulless things that carry an irony to their worth is a part of the art world that troubles me. I don't want to live in a world of irony and sarcasm, I want real connection and real growth. I would like to see work that reaches for our dreams and talks about our nightmares. I'm a very sarcastic person but I don't make art that is sarcastic. I prefer to see art that has emotion, that speaks to humanity, that doesn't exist as an esoteric secret language to an privileged group of MFAs. I feel that it's my responsibility as an artist to create work that speaks to the soul. The art that I admire, that I aspire to, moves me and makes me feel more alive.

What would you say is the main subject your work revolves around? Is there an idea you want to challenge through your work?

When I'm creating a new work it generally centers around an emotion or an experience that I'm trying to express. These are things rooted in my personal life or are inspired from loved ones; from there they evolve into a sort of personal mythology. The women I end up drawing are often an embodiment of archetypes. They're symbolic of these experiences, not a literal expression as much as one that's been mythologized—stories that have been boiled down to a concentrate, stripped of their reality to get at a more universal truth.

It's always important to me that these pieces have an ambiguous narrative. I want to tell a story, but I don't want to block the viewer out from their experience. It's very important to me that each piece has enough empty space within it for the viewer to finish the work with their insights.