

## Drawn through Degradation and Desire: In Conversation with Larassa Kabel

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I had the opportunity to engage in a conversation with Larassa about her works, and her process, after spending time on her website and exploring her practice. I share this, to reveal a bit more of what is underlying the dialectic that emerges, for us as viewer:

**SJH:** *You began as a fiber artist. I love that you identify the relationship between the line in the drawing and the stitch in weaving and embroidery - it is for me a representation of the hand, across multiple mediums. This is something I find most engaging about making. Do you share that consideration - an awareness of the hand as a key element in the making of work? And how does that translate for you in the process of production, the translation of an idea onto the paper?*

**LK:** I'm a maker. My relationship with the evidence of my hand work is incredibly key. I occasionally meet someone who doesn't care for photorealism on the grounds that the perfect version of what I recreated already exists and therefore does not need someone to recreate it. Yes, a photo does capture the image. However, my translation of it will never be that photo no matter how much I try, and therein is the frustration and the beauty. I need to wrestle with the process, practice it over and over, fail over and over, and learn to appreciate that those failures are ME. They are the injection of a very human feature into an otherwise mechanical process. Ultimately, I find the drawings far more beautiful than the original source because of the evidence of my hand - the way that my arm, wrist and fingers are predisposed to make certain kinds of marks because I am right handed or my fingers are short or I hold my pencil a certain way. And unlike a photograph, a drawing or painting is the accumulated evidence of my attention and effort over time. There are scores of hours in every piece - they are artifacts of the passage of my life.

**SJH:** *You have spoken about horses, in a previous interview (in Des Moines City Magazine), as a focal point for you. How do you see these works, of horses within a wide space, as situating with your other emphases - youths at perhaps turning points developmentally, and the oral sex works?*

**LK:** The overarching pattern to my focus is compassion. (I've got a soft heart, and I will tirelessly

defend it against becoming hardened.) Compassion is love in conversation with another, to see one's self in someone else. Compassion spurs us to be our best, and its absence enables us to do the worst. I use my art to bring about recognition understanding of gaps of compassion in the hope that it causes conversation that can lead to change. The BJ Girls are definitely in that camp. I'm interested in reinstating the women in the photos as people rather than flattened sex objects especially the ones where it appears that their coercion or lack of enjoyment or consent is the primary erotic driver. I find that gap between the sexes very problematic for women (and not very good for men, either). With that series, it is the specificity that is key, so I use the people directly. But there are some topics where using a direct representation would push people away rather than draw them in. In those cases, I find it easier to work symbolically. The Any Minute Now series of falling horses is in this category. I wanted to talk about death, my own and the universal "we all die". It is such a difficult topic for people to grapple with. As a society we are very distanced from the experience of death, and I think this causes incredible loneliness and alienation. Everyone will die. Almost everyone will have someone or thing that they love die. Where is the comfort? It should be coming from other people who have had the same experience and who can be comfortable just being with that person in pain. Instead, people turn away because their discomfort weighs more heavily than their compassion for the person in distress. The horses stand in for the person in free fall, someone who will not make it. They are out of any defined space because they are not really a narrative image like Encounter. They stand in for an experience of loss of control and imminent disaster, and they give people a chance to be still with it, to observe and see the beauty and fragility and panic. For me personally, I chose the horse because they are the first thing I fell in love with in my life, so to destroy it is an act of letting go, over and over again.

**SJH:** *There is a reliance on dissecting an image within your work - to in a sense reproduce and extend what is presented already visually through a photographic medium. What has led you to this process?*

**LK:** I have a love for control and craft. I used to wish that I could paint in beautiful, juicy brush strokes and be very expressive with my marks, but my hands and brain simply don't work that way. Besides, I love the challenge of reproducing something so carefully. There is a lot of thought and planning that go into creating that level of illusion which I really enjoy. I always make mistakes, so the presence of me as the artist is always there, but I have come to see those errors as the beautiful differences between the source and my art. And I do think the drawings and paintings are far lovelier than what I started out with.

Also, I love spending an inordinate amount of time with a subject. It is both meditative and rather essential to fully understanding why I'm doing what I'm doing. Slow, patient hours spent looking so deeply have resulted in a much richer and deeper understanding of my own interior life. I actually studied fibers in college and wove tapestries for my honors project. I loved spending hours and hours weaving just to create one inch across the tapestry, and it made me realize that my art making was just very process oriented. I don't do any fibers work now, but the slow buildup of marks feels very much like weaving or embroidery. Especially the horses. Each little line even looks a bit like a stitch.

**SJH:** *I am very struck by your paintings, and their often significant challenge to read at face value - they seem to suggest a potential for something to come - a potential violence or violation even. This seems similar to the sex drawings for me - there is a mixture of vulnerability and loss of control. I am curious as to your thoughts about this - am I perhaps misreading intention?*

**LK:** No, I don't think you are misreading. The fact that I'm a woman has had an enormous impact on my art. To be a woman is to grow up with an education in vulnerability, potential violence or violation, and issues of control. Everyone seems to want to control women. I don't understand why. It drives me crazy. I really struggle with the sheer volume of women who are molested or raped or killed. It's apparently an accepted epidemic. I have spent a lot of time wondering why rape exists and

how someone could enjoy having sex with someone who doesn't want to have sex with them. How does one get off when the other person is crying? It's beyond me. There is this gap between men and women (forgive the generalities) that seems to be rooted in the exertion of control over the other party. For example, the angry boy paintings came about when my son was little, and I started carrying my camera around just to catch what he did. I had these perfectly pleasant boys see me with a camera and suddenly pull what I call the "warrior face" - a huge, mock angry grimace that looks incredibly aggressive and rather intimidating. It was a real revelation about some of the differences between boys and girls. I NEVER had a girl do anything like that. They would be silly or sweet or pull a sexy posture, but they never pantomimed aggression. It was very common to have the boys practice aggressive postures and expressions. Aggression just seems to be a tool in men's social skills that they are unafraid to use, but women almost never do. And women are intimidated by it because it isn't necessarily an empty gesture. Plenty of women are hurt by men every day. So those drawings of women and girls giving blow jobs where they look uncertain or unhappy or are actually crying - they are another expression of this issue that weighs heavily on me.

**SJH:** *Your male BJ images contrast for me with your ones of women, in that there appears to be less vulnerability. You commented on the differences in aggression as a stance being taken by men versus women; do you see a greater level of control being presented when drawing the men giving blow jobs? Is your own response altered in regard to the consideration of vulnerability?*

**LK:** The male BJ images came about because someone expressed interest in seeing them, and I thought that would be interesting. I hadn't really considered that angle in my initial project, but when I started researching sources, I had a terrible time finding the same sorts of photos as I had found with the women. It was fascinating! I thought I was pretty spot on with my keyword search, and I had assumed that gay or straight, boyfriends will be boyfriends. Don't they both take those sorts of photos? Apparently not. Or at least not exactly. I found few POV photos, and the ones I did find usually did not show direct eye contact which is my preference. I'm still not entirely sure why there should be such a difference when the act is basically the same for men and women (in theory). I've asked gay guy

friends about this, and the best answer I got was that perhaps because they are guy to guy, there isn't a power dynamic the way there is potentially between men and women. I think there is something to that although I will admit I have never been in a gay male relationship and therefore can only take other people's word for it. Even if the (straight) couple are not having a power disparity in their actual act or relationship, there is a real current of male control that goes through a lot of straight porn that I think people just pick up on and imitate without thinking much of it. I was looking at some videos the other day, and over and over again, it was a male controlled act that definitely showed who was in charge. The men were having sex with women standing up - in one video the woman reached around to touch the man, and he grabbed her hand and made her put it over her head on the wall in front of her. She could only balance there and accept whatever he wanted to do. The other video was a blow job, again the man was standing but with the woman squatting down in front of him, and when she reached towards him to stabilize herself and have some control over the force of the action, he took her hands and placed them behind her back. He then did whatever he wanted, and she let him. It was really interesting. And it looked incredibly uncomfortable. If you were getting your sex education from watching either of these videos (and they aren't unusual), then you would think that the man was in control and the woman would like whatever he did. As someone who is experienced, I look at it and think, "Wow, those are some varsity level moves that woman has because that is a lot getting rammed into her throat without her gagging." And I also think that man to man, if you are going to have sexual contact with someone, you probably need to have more of a conversation about what is going to happen. There isn't a template for "he inserts tab A into slot B blah blah blah". Guys have to decide what will happen and who will do what. Perhaps that affects the porn. There might be more of a variety in its expression and power dispersion.

**SJH:** *As a parent, how does having a child influence your thoughts about what to draw or paint? I am thinking of Sally Mann as I write this - and her desire to capture what she thinks about and sees, but over time coming to recognize the impact of her choices and how they have been viewed by her children.*

**LK:** Becoming a parent made a huge impact on my art because it was such an overwhelming experience that I couldn't help but make work that reflected what I was going through, especially when Emmet was very young. I had never loved someone so much, and with that kind of love comes the realization of how vulnerable you are to heartbreak (The Hazards of Love series is about losing a child, At Least It's Not the End of the World is actually imagining if he died and how that would feel, etc.). But as to whether I do work about subjects that aren't child friendly because I have a child, it has never been something that I've worried about. Emmet doesn't really pay much attention to what I'm doing with my art (he has told me that he likes sculpture but doesn't much care for drawings and paintings), and by now he is old enough that it isn't such a big conversation. When he was younger, he may have seen some things that were more adult, but he didn't recognize them for what they were because he was too young. Reminds me of going to see Grease with my mom when I was eight, and the whole Pussy Wagon part of the song Greased Lightning never even entered my consciousness. My mother, on the other hand, was mortified. But she never said anything about it, and by the time I was old enough to notice it, I was old enough to handle it. Sally Mann's art is different in that her children are so directly represented and because of the fierce aversion Americans have for nudity. I'm curious about what her children think about it now. Personally, I love the work and am grateful that she did it. It is such a lovely, unique and personal view into her family's life, but she did have some creepy stalkers talking about her children and that must have scared the crap out of her and her husband.

**SJH:** *Where do you see the viewer meeting you, with your work? I have in my own writing spoken before of the object as a mediator of the relationship between artist and viewer, where a form of projection, by both, is engaged and made active, an intersubjective collaboration in effect (if that makes sense). How do you envision, if you do, that transpiring with your work?*

**LK:** I have always thought about the BJ drawings as a collaborative meeting between my ideas, the physical work and the audience. For one, the fact that it is POV and direct eye contact creates an implicit engagement between the viewer and the girl. You can't help but become the recipient of her attention. You are the one causing her emotional

response. This means that there are a lot of different ways to feel about the work depending on your sex and sexual orientation. Straight women have a very different type of engagement because they are basically having themselves reflected back. Straight men mainly see what they usually see but feel like it's more subtle and sideways. I'm not sure what gay men feel about being put in that position, but I have sold quite a bit of this work to gay men, so there is something interesting going on there. Secondly, I hope that by showing lots of these drawings together (which is very different from seeing one alone), it does bring forward this thing I have noticed about the relationships between men and women and sex and power. The more challenging the work is, the more interesting the conversations have been around it. And that's what I always hope for.

**SJH:** *You wrestle directly with the concerns that we most, as individuals, seek to keep private and contained. And capture beautifully the tension that creates. How do you balance that within the process of making the work? Is there a strong affective response that you find yourself managing during the making of the piece? How is that addressed?*

**LK:** Research is the hardest part to manage emotionally. It's when the ideas are the freshest, and to be honest, the Internet has shown me things that I sincerely wish I could un-see. I don't know if I would have the capacity to deal with some of these ideas if I had an unhappier life, but I feel passionately about them, and they won't leave me be. I break the research time in small chunks and afterwards I do a "palate cleansing" with something so silly or ridiculously cute that it kind of balances out all the ugliness. Baby goat videos have been very effective. Also babies who fart and scare themselves. I also have two Boston terriers who are both delightful to look at and who force me to take pretty long walks every morning which is incredibly meditative and centering. Once I have gotten into the actual making of a piece, I don't feel them the same way. It becomes a bit of a job - something I can do and then walk away from. Thank goodness. Otherwise I would be exhausted all of the time. After the piece is made, I get that same charge when I get to talk with other people about the project. That's pretty gratifying.