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Marsha Pels, *Fallout Necklace*, 2018, patinaed cast aluminum, patinaed steel, flame-worked glass, powder-printed glass, 7 × 10 × 15". From the series "Trophies of Abuse," 2013–19. Photo: Charles Benton.

Marsha Pels

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Frankly, I was a little taken aback by “Solace,” New York sculptor Marsha Pels’s solo exhibition at Lubov. Previously unfamiliar with her career—her sprawling welded site-specific pieces made of discarded steel from the 1980s, her decades-long practice of transforming found objects through casting, and her tradition of severe visual metaphor—I arrived unprepared for such brazenly melodramatic work. The two pieces on display, created twenty years apart, were united by the artist’s gauche yet supremely polished strain of brute symbolism, stark political commentary, and untempered emotion. It was actually not this content but the sculptures’ scale—the spatial just-rightness of their respective installations in the tiny gallery’s pair of rooms—that impressed me first.

The enormous *Fallout Necklace*, 2018, whose longest measurement is fifteen feet, overwhelmed the larger (but still very small) windowed space, hanging horizontally

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from wire cables at a tilt. Viewers navigated the sunlit perimeter of its cast-aluminum oval form with care, skirting the daggerlike peaks of tracery punctuating the choker, which Pels designed in the ornately severe nineteenth-century tradition of cut steel and Berlin iron. Eight of these spiked protrusions—which are studded with pieces of powder-printed glass, like colored gemstones—serve as frames for portraits of heads (and thankfully some ex-heads) of state.

The inlaid, powder-printed glass cameos feature Bashar al-Assad, Xi Jinping, Kim Jong-un, Emmanuel Macron, Theresa May, Angela Merkel, Vladimir Putin, and Donald Trump—ominous embellishments. These leaders and despots came across as glossy baubles, souvenirs, or pawns, collected to adorn an anthropomorphized greater force—like some monstrous embodiment of empire, perhaps. The heavy necklace, which belongs to a series titled “Trophies of Abuse,” 2013–19, evokes an image of royal jewels, the spoils of war, and the gains of capitalist extraction underpinning queenly status. Imagine it flipped, though, and the sculpture resembles a crown. The work leverages a rather obvious poetry, but its sparkling command as a mammoth object, so laboriously and finely wrought, isn’t reducible to just that.

Fallout’s counterpart, in the adjacent windowless little room, was similarly austere and likewise suspended, but strung up like a gloomily stage-lit marionette. *Pieta*, 1998, is a haunting update of the Christian art-historical theme of Mary cradling her dead son. In Pels’s scene, Jesus is not a crucified man but a crystal infant, a lifeless baby’s translucent apparition cast from a Toys“R”Us purchase, while the saintly maternal figure is invisible, except for her cast-bronze gas mask and dominatrix apparel: stiletto boots, laced opera gloves, and, naturally, a corset. Mother and whore merge into a single Holy Ghost who endures the fumes of a noxious social bind (or something more lethal, which requires hard-core PPE), and her false fetishy power is pathetic in the face of a child’s death. Pels portrays the archetypal feminine dichotomy, its horror and age-old harm, offering if not exactly fresh insight at least a deeply felt account.

Something clicked into place for me when I found a 1979 interview on the artist’s website in which Pels questioned Louise Bourgeois about her work. “You’ve never put up a show that wasn’t treated as an environment, have you?” Pels tellingly asked Bourgeois early on in the text. “Right, absolutely, the show is a room,” Bourgeois replied. The psychosexual patchwork of materials and signs in Pels’s lexicon may fall somewhere in a maverick Surrealism-inflected lineage established by the sui generis French artist.

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Pels's rooms in "Solace" were environments, conjuring some of the uncanny wonder of Bourgeois's 360-degree diorama-like "Cells" sculptures of 1991–2008, that is, if one were allowed to step inside them. Of course, where Bourgeois remained aloof and elliptical, moving in and out of abstraction, Pels has worked with visual hyperbole and detailed specifics, arguably to excess. I liked the show—the necklace was especially compelling with its forthright fairy-tale menace. But perhaps the most perilous aspect of the artist's presentation was her unabashed embrace of heavy-handed "dark" aesthetics, which nearly tipped over into camp. Yet one wonders: Is it really so bad if the artist hits you over the head? Not if she can pull it off. And in this instance, I believe she did.

— *Johanna Fateman*

<https://www.artforum.com/print/reviews/202104/marsha-pels-85269>

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