

Irena Haiduk

SEDUCTIVE EXACTING REALISM
// THE RENAISSANCE SOCIETY
& 14TH ISTANBUL BIENNALE

By Natalie Hegert

SER

WAITING IS IMPORTANT FOR THIS WORK.

Please, have a seat. Make yourself comfortable. While you wait I will tell you a story.

Two old sisters who lived in a small house by the sea looked out over the calm waves one day and saw a ship approaching. There was no wind, and the sea was like glass. Barely a ripple moving over its surface. The sisters watched the ship as it ever so slowly came closer to the shore.

“Look!” said one, “How it sparkles! It shines like gold!”

“Yes!” said the other, “This ship must be heavy with riches!”

All day they leaned out of the windows of their small house, keeping their eyes on the ship. “With these doldrums, it may take hours for it to reach us,” said the one. They watched for hours, studying the silhouette of the vessel as the sun slowly dipped behind it.

A moonless night settled over the little house by the sea, but the ship still shone bright like gold glinting in the sun. The old women did not sleep. They leaned out of the windows of their small house, mesmerized by its bright light.

The next day the ship was closer to the shore, and the old women could see all the treasure aboard: money, jewels, high fashion couture, sports cars, LV handbags, Apple watches.

The women smiled and embraced each other, they waited for the ship to come ashore. The ship, however, while always coming closer, never seemed to arrive. Days they waited and watched the ship draw nearer, so slowly. Their smiles faded. They did not again embrace. They waited for sleep the way they waited for the ship, their minds beset with the image of it and all its contents. Years passed, with the ship still

approaching, still gleaming in the sunlight, still lighting up the night. Years passed, and the sisters kept their sleepless watch.

Some days they walked along the shore. Finally, one day, one looked to her sister and cried, “I don’t want what’s on that ship. All I want now is sleep. But I cannot tear the vision of that thing from my eyes.”

But her cries were met with only a blank stare, her sister’s eyes glassy, like the calm, reflective sea. “Yes, but don’t you see?” she said, “I think it’s a little closer today. It will be any day now that it comes ashore.”

The one sister then reached for a sharp stone and, taking one last look at the golden ship, ablaze with light as the sun set behind it, she tore out her eyes.

HOPE IS THE GREATEST WHORE.

Irena Haiduk’s *Seductive Exacting Realism (SER)*, presented concurrently The Renaissance Society in Chicago and the 14th Istanbul Biennale, seeks to blind its audience. “What this work provides is not a Western image,” Haiduk says, “It takes time, it has to strain attention.” It is a work that is impossible to consume quickly. It involves the abdication of the sense of sight, opening up our tactile and aural sensibilities. Viewers first stay in a waiting room before being allowed to enter. And in Istanbul, the work is only open when the seas are calm.

“*What is revolutionary art?*” This question was posed to the Chicago/Belgrade-based artist recently, and prompted the development of this work. “It hit a nerve,” Haiduk told me, “because I think the word revolution is as political as wedding planning.” But the person who came to mind as she

considered this question is not an artist at all, but rather a political activist and consultant.

The centerpiece of *SER* is imageless, comprised instead of an audio track, a dialogue between Haiduk and Srđa Popović, former leader of Otpor!, the non-violent student uprising that helped depose Serbian dictator Slobodan Milošević, and the current executive director of CANVAS (the Centre for Applied Nonviolent Action and Strategies), a branding consultancy for political demonstrations and regime change that has advised resistance movements in fifty countries, such as Turkey, Egypt, and Ukraine. Their conversation, recreated by voice actors in a melodic dialogue, issues from speakers in the nave of the Renaissance Society, and in a “dead dark” room at the Italian School in Istanbul, like a song of sirens, arousing the senses.

“All these revolutions fail on their own terms,” Haiduk remarks, speaking of the CANVAS-assisted political movements, “what follows is destabilization, privatization, waiting, waiting for the benefits of democracy and capitalism that never come. What CANVAS leaves behind is a permanent futureless present.” Whether in Ukraine, or Egypt, or Turkey, these popular uprisings, branded with logos and led by Twitter feeds, watch as their explosive energy leads to interminable transition periods. “All CANVAS touches is left to waste away, like sailors in the arms of sirens.”

“But something does arrive,” Haiduk says, “New markets for the first world,” primed and ready for the consumption of Western images and commodities. In 2011, Wikileaks revealed that Popović colluded with the global intelligence firm Stratfor, demonstrating the structural

complicity between Western markets and revolutionary action. This, as Haiduk shows, is likewise a regular feature of Western art institutions. “It really got me how similar Srđja and I are,” she points out, “His source of funding and mine are the same; most of the art institutions in the first world are funded by corporations that use Stratfor and companies like Stratfor. But Srđja does something I cannot do, he creates global socio-economic change.”

With *Seductive Exacting Realism*, it is not Haiduk’s attempt to indict or criticize; rather, she is “trying to feel the features of CANVAS.” At The Renaissance Society, long-legged Eastern European models wearing Apple watches, a dedicated *SER* logo, the voice of the Asian Siri, high-street boutique trappings, the music—the complete branded experience—seduce the viewer, enticing them into an environment where the image is withheld, where it becomes instead an oral image. Where they must feel around in the dark, blind, with only their hands and feet and ears to rely on, where all things—object, human, corporation—become equal in the dark. “The Western art institution dreams of revolution,” she says, “Perhaps it’s a nightmare—enlightenment cannot be at ease in the dark.” Haiduk wants you to submit to the song of the sirens.

FEEL THE HAIRS ON THE EARS, AS GOETHE SAID, FEAR COMES THROUGH THE EAR.

Images courtesy of the artist, 2015.

HUMAN =^{c*} COMMODITY

*corporation