

SLEEK

Art & Photography

The magnetic merging of art and life with Eliza Douglas

The painter, performer, musician and Balenciaga muse is tearing down the walls between art and fashion—By Hettie Judah

18 March, 2020



I last saw Eliza Douglas in March last year, getting chased around the doomy subterranean Tanks of the Tate Modern by dis-oriented hoards wielding camera phones. She was leading the cast in her partner Anne Imhof's last performance, *Sex* (2019): playing guitar; alternately moving through slow choreography and marching at speed through the interlinked postindustrial spaces; exuding disenchantment, ennui and detached cool.

Having become a familiar figure as a result of her collaborations with Imhof (including the *Angst* trilogy [2016–], the Golden Lion-winning *Faust* [2017] and *Sex*), Douglas' solo work has also attracted attention. Having coupled up with Imhof the year of *Angst*, the artist held her debut exhibition, *I am All Soul* (2016), at Air de Paris: largely paintings in which commissioned portraits of hands and feet were joined by more loosely painted gestural zigzags, as if describing bodies reduced to their sensitive extremities.

More recently, she has played with ideas of authorship in a series of paintings, first shown at *My Gleaming Soul / I am Fireball* (2017) in Kunstverein Wiesbaden, depicting young male models in idealised settings. Douglas purchased photographs of interiors from a stock image site, then outsourced the final paintings to the Dafen artist village in southern China – with uncanny results.

In 2016, Douglas was scouted for Balenciaga. Demna Gvasalia had become the brand's creative director the year before, and the artist's angular, androgynous beauty matched the knowing awkwardness of the newly reimagined house under its new chief. Since then, the worlds of art and fashion have overlapped in her life: Balenciaga garb featured in *Sex*, as well as at a recent show alongside Puppies Puppies (AKA Jade Kuriki Olivo) at Zurich's Galerie Francesca Pia last year.

In general, however, this convergence between the two spheres has resulted from the way Douglas refuses to discriminate between them. "I think the boundaries between these things are only imaginary," she says. Whether striding through the Tate or along a runway, posing for photographer Charlie White (as she did for his Autumn/Winter 2018 Balenciaga campaign) or in the smog of *Angst* at Berlin's Hamburger Bahnhof, her presence is constant, steady and magnetic.

Hettie Judah: The last show I saw you in was a collaboration with Puppies Puppies. How did that come about?

Eliza Douglas: I invited Puppies Puppies to do the show with me at Galerie Francesca Pia. In the end, we didn't work very collaboratively, it was more that we had a very basic theme for the show and then made our own separate works within that.

HJ: You showed video works using material from The Walking Dead (2010–). What interests you about zombies, or to put that another way, what interests you in the wider cultural fascination with zombies?

ED: I am not particularly interested in zombies per se. I go through phases of watching quite a bit of TV, and something that interests me is the increasing presence of violence in television. I watched *The Walking Dead*, and there are so many seasons – 139 episodes! – which means they constantly had to cook up new zombie scenes, which is a somewhat limited motif. So within the show there are hours of zombies either killing or being killed. I wanted to see what it would be like if all the humans were removed, and only zombies remained.

And so, there is a video of seemingly endless zombie scenes, which stands alone as an artwork but also worked in conjunction with a performance I based around it. For the performance, I made this tattered and stained costume for myself. I used a Balenciaga shirt because I thought that was the easiest way to parody myself. I also had zombie makeup – fake rotten teeth, white contact lenses. During the performance I mostly just lay in front of the video and watched it. Partially it was about representing the media fixation and narcissism that's so prevalent today. I also sometimes got up and walked like a zombie through the crowd. This also was comedic to me, stumbling through this context in which people are often hyper self- and socially-conscious.

"I think the boundaries between these things are only imaginary"

HJ: In the past, you've shown painting. Are you moving into new areas in your work, or was this a direct result of the collaboration?

ED: No, it wasn't the result of the collaboration. Throughout my life, I have worked in a bunch of different mediums, but just haven't shown much besides painting yet. Since I have only been making art professionally for four years, and within that time I have also been performing and making music, I have only just begun to make all the art I want to make. I'm quite sure, in the long run, I'll make work with a variety of mediums.

HJ: You are an enthusiastic collaborator, it seems. Do you feel it brings something particular to your work?

ED: I actually find collaboration pretty difficult, generally. It feels most productive and natural to me in the realm of music. When it comes to art, Anne is the main person I have worked with and the only person I really feel I have truly collaborated with. Though, it depends on what aspects. We did a collaborative painting show at Galerie Buchholz a few years ago; that was an explicit collaboration. And we often work together to make the music for the shows. I also style her work, which I think significantly impacts the images that are created in the pieces, and I am generally quite involved in the process of making the work, so sometimes I have conceived of scenes that happen in the performances, and so on. When it comes to my performance, almost everything I do in the work stems from my own decisions and psyche. I am not performing a character. So although it is under the umbrella of someone else's art, the songs I sing, the way I perform, and my general aesthetic contributions are natural extensions of my development, experiences and emotional landscape.

HJ: How did you meet Anne?

ED: We met in 2016. We had heard about each other because we were both living in Frankfurt and knew some people in common. We first spoke to each other at an event in Berlin though. Soon after that we got together.

HJ: When did you start working together?

ED: Pretty much right away.

HJ: How do you balance your solo work as an artist with your work with Anne? The time involved in one of the big performance residencies seems overwhelming.

ED: Sometimes I can struggle with carving out enough space for my own work. But I like working on multiple things at once. I also have developed ways to work on my art practice while travelling.

HJ: I was really interested – surprised, even – to see you incorporating references to Balenciaga into your painting. It seems like a very contemporary way of seeing things – not creating false divisions. How do you view the relationship between these different aspects of what you do?

ED: Yes, I think the boundaries between these things are only imaginary. So of course, what I end up doing and seeing in my life affects my art. As far as I can remember, the only reference I have made to them is to put a pair of their sneakers in a painting. This was mostly because I thought they would work well in that specific painting, it wasn't super conceptually driven. With the hands and feet series, I have mostly used my own hands and feet, and so often my own clothing items and objects around me end up in the paintings. My art is not distinct from my life.

HJ: The atmosphere at Sex was crazy – the audience seemed very invasive, constantly holding cameras in their faces and so on. How do you prepare for those long performances? How do you cope with the intensity of that situation, night after night?

ED: Like most other humans, I find just being alive to be really intense; I think it requires an evolving system of coping mechanisms. When it comes to performing, there have definitely been some times when it has felt very exhausting or frustrating, but overall there is something interesting and fulfilling about it, and it feels worth it in the end. It really helps if I write down pretty specifically where I have to be and when, and I also feel way more confident if I have memorised my lyrics or am well acquainted with my guitar parts.

HJ: Which projects are you looking forward to this year – are you busy?

ED: I will have my second show at Air de Paris in early April. It will be a painting show and possibly I will add a performative element. Also, Anne's next show is at the Palais de Tokyo in the autumn, so I am already starting to work on music for that and some of my own work will be featured in it as well. And as usual, I will be performing in it.

ALL LOOKS: Balenciaga SS20

PHOTOGRAPHY: Nadine Fraczkowski

STYLING: Eliza Douglas

HAIR AND MAKE-UP: Seiya Iibuchi



















