

RECLAIMING CHILDHOOD –

A conversation between Anna Maria Pinaka and Chris Kraus

CK: Hi Anna Maria, we emailed a lot a few years back – it's good to finally meet, even on Zoom. Can you walk me around the show?

AM: Yes sure! There are four videos in the show, paintings, drawings, props and murals and then there is the recording of my band's performance, *Baby's Breath*. The video that's presented most centrally is called *Past Where The Sky Turns* (2025, 15'17). It's projected through a mosquito net bed canopy before hitting the wall.

CK: The mosquito net canopy is very girly! I always wanted one – and finally got one, but not until I was in my 30s. But I love the way sculptures seem to emerge out of the film in a very organic, unstoppable way. There's the projected image, that locks you in, but the sculpture just seems to ooze out of the screen and into the room. It's scary and beautiful.

AM: Our idea was to evoke the sense and atmosphere of a teenage bedroom. There are marks that refer to childhood but then they blur into other timelines that are less easy to quantify. I chose the symbol of the teenage bedroom and then turned it into a site where different art hierarchies can play off each other, the pure and impure, the high and the low. Stages of formation and creativity emerge and then melt into each other.

In *Past Where The Sky Turns* a princess, played by my sister, Ioanna Pinaka, flies around the city, lands, walks and dances in alleyways. She enters a bar. At first, she seems a bit out of place but then she dances and meets a woman, played by *Baby's Breath's* drummer, Lia Amprikidou. The two of them leave together, make out, and the princess falls into a grunge orgasm. The video is made in my home city, Thessaloniki, and it recalls events and the mood of my teens in the 1990s.

CK: I love the way the teenage bedroom becomes the master site, or holding pattern, for the rest of the show. Did you have your own bedroom when you were a teenager?

AM: I had one, but it wasn't pink or girly, the way this show is made to look like.

CK: Mine had this ugly white and gold fake French Provincial dresser that I stupidly chose when I was 11 and then was stuck with. Really, the teenage bedroom is a prison cell, don't you think? Or maybe a cross between prison and launching pad. It's certainly a place of departure for the imagination. Beginning when I was 11 or 12, I was just dying to leave the family home and get out into the world. But you can't, it's too soon. So, the bedroom becomes both a holding cell and a dreaming space.

AM: That's very right, although I didn't think of it as prison or an escape plan space this time around, it's a correct association. I can still feel this excessive sense of urgency.

CK: Yes, the urgency at the time feels so real! How long is the video?

AM: Fifteen minutes.

CK: And is there speaking in it, or is it music or silence?

AM: The video has an original soundtrack, three tracks, made by musician and composer Ioannis Chrimatopoulos, together with Lia Amprikidou, the drummer of my band of princesses. There is no dialogue or other speaking.

CK: The Princess trope is such a rich association for girls. Can we talk for a moment about princesses? Has it always had meaning for you?

AM: The soul of my project was my desire to create a fictional band - my dream band, a band of punk princesses. There is the princess of Spring, the princess of the Night, the princess of the Ocean and the princess of the Rainbow. At first, I thought of us covering one track, *Teenage Murder*, by the Scottish band Helicon with our heads tilted back, semi deformed or suspended. I wanted to bring together my childhood desire to be a princess, and my awe for punk and grunge women musicians, both of which I watched on TV when growing up. I wanted to give birth to a gang of princesses that are rebelliously girly, raw in their femme-ness.

CK: The princesses you watched as a girl on TV, I'm guessing they were completely incongruous to where you were living in Thessaloniki. For a start, were they Greek or were they Disney princesses, American princesses?

AM: The ones I studied on TV were mostly Germanic. For example, there was Princess Sissi – that show was a fictionalized chronicle of the life of the Empress of Austria. And then there was Amalia of Oldenburg, who was the first queen of Greece. A teenager herself, Amalia was sent from Bavaria to take that role together with King Otto. Their installation as the first royals in a poor and heterogenous country can be seen in the context of a wider imperial whitewashing effort in the name of creating a national, unifying Greek identity that would be approved of by Europe. And Amalia became a symbol of beauty and grace that Greece's peripheral or 'uncivilised' women and girls should aspire towards.

But for sure Disney princesses played a role too in my upbringing, as models of womanhood. As did fairy-tale books and their illustrations. And I remember the euphoria and dysphoria of identifying as well as failing to identify with such figures. Now of course the desire to want to look or act like a canonical princess is a symptom of an oppression. With this project I wanted to move beyond the gesture of correction (a world where a girl shouldn't have to aspire to be or look like a princess), and into a realm where the desire is embraced in its complexity and given the space to subvert the codes that have generated it. That's how we created the princess dresses and head pieces for *Baby's Breath*, inspired by more abstract and, to me, more vigorous in their imaginative potential costumes, that I remember looking for during carnival season in Greece.

CK: What is it that makes a princess, do you think? How would you describe the persona of the princess?

AM: I wanted my princesses to operate beyond personhood. That's why, in contradiction to their straight-forward titles (Princess of the Night, etc), the princesses of my project don't have solidified identities or dramatic backstories. They exist inside a space of excess, a gap, their identities remaining unresolved, resisting articulation.

CK: But the real appeal of the princess trope is 'escape', don't you think? To become a princess is also to escape from mundane reality. The princess has freedom to escape the banal demands of the regular, everyday world. The princess is magic! Like unicorns. Were they a thing for you?

AM: I was more into seahorses and My Little Ponies - I still am. But I see what you mean about magic and escape. I really like the idea of this otherworldliness, the magic, and the sort of dirtiness of the human and the mundane, merging.

CK: I love that. That's part of every dress-up game – the gap between the fantasy that you aim for, and the reality. What's on the wall over there?

AM: On the other side of the video installation, is a large mural, of a princess doing gymnastics above two kissing dogs.

CK: The drawings are wonderful, raw and accomplished. Did you make them directly onto the gallery wall?

AM: They're painted on the wall, yes. And alongside the murals there are sketches, watercolors on paper, and paintings on textiles. All of them are iterations of different kind of princess figures, together with animals, sea-creatures, and strawberries, mermaids and bunnies. There are some props inside the space, paraphernalia, objects that reminded me of moments where I wanted to grow from childhood to teenage-hood, like thinking 'I should throw this heart-shaped cushion away because it isn't cool'.

CK: You have these shelves of precious objects. Which is very, very teen girl. I still have one! Do you?

AM: I do too, yes.

CK: It's like a shrine.

AM: Exactly, and there is also this drawing I did when I was five. It says: 'Happy Birthday to Me', and I found it very randomly. It's a self-portrait as a princess, and the only framed work in the show. I guess partly I've been trying to break down the hierarchy between high and low art.

CK: Yes. It's a way of redeeming sentiment, too. Sentiment as in *feeling*. I think it's so interesting that you put these drawings you made as an artist alongside a drawing you made as a child. What changes, what disappears, what gets reclaimed? Do you even remember making that drawing?

AM: Not at all. I found it by luck, inside an old notebook. It seems that it was my birthday, and the teacher must have asked everyone to draw something for me, so there is a whole series of princesses that look identical to each other, and they all say, 'happy birthday to Anna Maria', along with the one I made. But I don't remember at all drawing it.

CK: It's actually the childhood drawing that seems much more repressed ... it's more stereotypical than the adult artist drawing. So, you could say the learning is an unlearning here ...

AM: Indeed. Although, on the other side of that drawing, there are some figures that are really wild and look much closer to what I draw nowadays.

CK: Do you remember drawing them?

AM: No, absolutely not. I stopped drawing when I was around seven or eight, because they told me that I drew really badly, and I got angry. My drawing moves are stuck into that moment.

CK: That's so weird. So, becoming an artist was partly a reclamation of childhood...

AM: We also have this small original picture of my birthday cake when I was eight years old. Two paintings on textiles, the strawberry mural...

CK: This strawberry, that strawberry... I'm looking now at the picture of the strawberry on the cake, but then it flies off the cake and onto another place on the wall. The strawberry is like the princess, right? An important symbol ...

AM: It's like an anchor, or a focus point. It's always there, it's very accessible, but it's also potentially messy or too juicy.

CK: Mmm, too juicy, yeah. That makes sense.

AM: Then there are the three videos that play in monitors, *Good At It* (2014, 1'40) *Modern Family Vol 1*, (2016, 3'20) and *Bycatch* (2020, 8'08). The last two of these videos feature my grandmother. They are all earlier works, made between 2014 and 2020.

At the time that I made these videos, I was exploring the ontology of the image. I wondered whether my grandmother's body and mine might be able to touch through these images – if distance and closeness could dissolve into a new kind of relationship between us.

CK: Seeing them now in the context of this exhibition, I'm struck by the contrast – she is sick and elderly, the polar opposite of the princesses who are all strawberries and 'a flight'. The grandmother images are drab – mundane, maybe even depressing, the way real life can be. They are earthbound and limited, unlike the princess trope of magic, pure flight and fantasy.

AM: I didn't think at the time that these videos would ever be presented through a wider platform. But I'm glad they're here now, because they lay the ground for the way I see 'dirtiness', or the mundanity of daily life and the fairytale world co-existing.

There's also the intergenerational aspect. My sister, the youngest in the line of women, is seen flying in the sky. Then there is my grandmother, who is more trapped in a way, and there is one dress of a doll that someone gave to my mom shortly after I was born, which is also hanging, floating in the exhibition.

CK: The dress is also pure fantasy. It's like a quinceanera dress. But I see what you're saying, it's sad the way fantasy is eventually supplanted by actual life – although maybe not necessarily tragic. It's a lot to deal with. Thank you for walking me through all this work, and the show.