





# AIDA RUILOVA

Mixed media artist, sculptor, and filmmaker Aida Ruilova is candid in her revelations about her own art obsessions. What makes Ruilova unique is that she doesn't make any effort to hide her influences. Ruilova's practice is rooted in developing a kind of conceptual investigation into the way an image or word can be inherently imbued with a possessive or provocative quality. Aesthetically, a connection to the transgressive aspects of horror and exploitation cinema colors her entire body of work. This makes sense: the first film Ruilova ever saw in theaters was John Carpenter's *The Thing*. Ruilova located the viewer's attraction to horror and reveals it as both a source of escapism, and a source of post-traumatic euphoria.

text and portrait by **ADAM LEHRER**

Recently, Ruilova has been working with sculpture and collage in ways that build on the ideas developed in her films, but particularly expand on ideas related to the intersection of image and body. Ruilova's most recent exhibition at the Fortnight Institute, *Smoke Gets in Your Eyes*, might feel like a departure in practice, but is actually an effective extension of previously explored concepts. Featuring a variety of text-based glass sculptures that also act as smoking devices with words like "LOVE," "DESIRE," or "ANAL." The sculptures emphasize the manner in which art, image and language interact with the body and provide a transformative experience. Ruilova and I spoke at length about our mutual love of cinema, her disregard for notions of "high" and "low" culture, and what it's like being an artist equally considered by both the film and contemporary art worlds.

**ADAM LEHRER:** Your films do have a specific feeling and mood and darkness, is that on purpose?

**AIDA RUILOVA:** I don't know if it's on purpose. Clearly I've always gravitated towards certain kinds of feelings. The early works that I shot in my bed-

room or basement dealt with this compression of time and how in so little time I could have so much impact on a viewer. Those early videos had a language. They just played with that line between anxiety and a sense of humor.

*It's like your films are breaking down cinema to its core elements. Your movies are...*  
Experiential.

*Is that a conscious decision to take the things that you love about films and filter it into these experiential videos?*

I never thought of a clear separation between "art films" and feature films because it's all moving image. With *Gone* I was working within conventions of genre film, specifically the "Final Girl" convention. People want to be scared when they see these movies. I wanted to make a piece that sustained that anxiety through its duration.

*Are you drawn to immediacy in artwork?*

I'm a product of my generation. I grew up on MTV and I think there was something with that short attention span that was important to me when I made my first videos. I wanted somebody to

walk into a gallery and not have to sit there for 25 minutes watching something. In a way, video is the bastard child of cinema. So working in video, I cut it like it's a piece of trash. When I went to film school, we were cutting and splicing film.

*Where'd you go?*

University of South Florida. I feel good about the fact that when I started there, I had a physical relationship with film. When you cut and splice film and put it in a projector, it falls apart if the cuts are too short. With digital, there was no preciousness.

*What stuff were you looking at back then?*

When I started working with video I was looking at a lot of Richard Kern's films.

*I love his film from 1985, Stray Dogs, with David Wojnarowicz.*

I remember seeing his films and loving those films and I still love his photography too. When I was making those videos, I was looking at his films a lot. Back then, there was film and there was video. And now it doesn't even matter because there are so many





Aida Ruilova, *Immoral Tales*, 2014. Super 16mm film with sound, TRT: 44 seconds.  
Courtesy of the artist and Marlborough Chelsea.

digital products. Nobody cares. Film is clearly more luxurious to work in because the image is gorgeous. So when I shot *Goner* I was like, "Holy shit, 35mm is like porn."

*It's a novelty thing, too.*

Right, but you're not going to bring videos to the New York Film Festival, they're not going to be highlighted in the cinema world. Kern's work made me realize I can be totally not careful in making videos. But now no one cares what anything is shot on.

*I thought it was interesting what you said about growing up as a pop culture junkie. I grew up with MTV, but I didn't know I was looking at art.*

The Madonna video - that's inspired by Maya Deren!

*Yeah. Then you grow up and realize a lot of that stuff, magazines and music videos, were art.*

Right, that there's reference to the images. There's somebody who's making these videos and there's always language that exists prior to that. I think that's the whole idea of this chain of artists and creatives.

*And that's something I wanted to talk with you about. How did this referential practice come into fruition, where you're making work about the artists you love?*

After I made those first videos, it was clear that those images came from movies and other things that I liked. I tried to do my own versions of those within my images. Then I started working for the first time with this director Jean Rollin who's this exploitation, soft-core, pseudo-surrealist filmmaker; 'Fantastique' cinema is what they would call his work. I reached out [to him] through his son who I found online. Then I met Jean in

Paris in his home and we shot a short video called *Tuning* where we're both together in his apartment. We started writing letters back and forth and I made a zine of his letters that I gave to you. I knew I wanted to make a longer film with him. Longer meaning, like, six minutes (laughs).

*And that was Life Like?*

Yeah. What I wanted to do with that film is cast a woman who resembles women in his films and my film sort of used his work as material to work with. I inserted his films into my film and got Jean to portray himself being dead. He did this film called *The Rape of the Vampire*, so in a way it was like my film vampired off of his entire body of work. The film works as homage to him but also puts us in the same group.

*His work is really hard to find, but I've watched clips of it and his stills look like the best fine art photographs you've ever seen.*

His stills are amazing.

*Him and Jack Smith, I think, definitely have parallels. Jack Smith's stills are also really amazing.*

It's funny because some films don't work that way, like the movies are really good but the stills look like shit. I discovered Rollin's work through stills. That's what made me want to see the films.

*I consider Rollin to be as important to underground cinema as Kenneth Anger or Warhol, but those guys are celebrated by the art world. Rollin, not so much.* I want people to look at him. It's funny because I was contacted by somebody last year because BAM is doing a retrospective on his work. And I've always championed his work, because his work is really important. Once BAM does that, his work could be more

recognized. I feel really fortunate with certain people I've been able to collaborate with. Like Karen Black. It's wonderful.

*The video you did with her was Meet the Eye.*

And Raymond [Pettibon, Aida's husband]. I always admired Raymond's work and Jean's work, so I feel fortunate that I can integrate that work into my own.

*I love it. It's like elevated homage. Homage as artwork.*

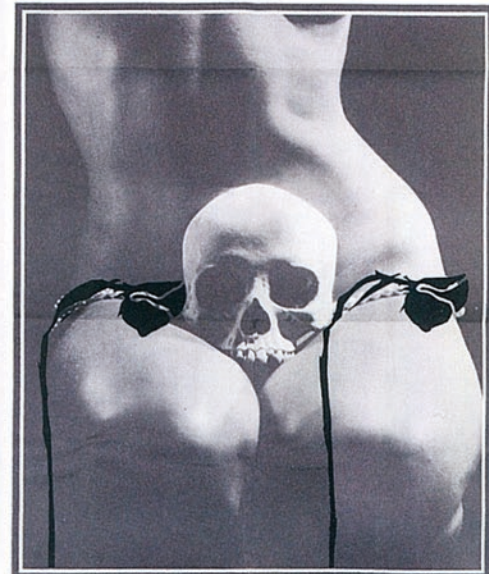
It's like fan fiction - right?

*That's such a good way to put it.*

I love all that kind of stuff. The video I did with Karen Black was the first time I wrote a script. I was watching a ton of *The Twilight Zone*. It's so beautifully written, and beautifully lays out the conventions of those kinds of shows. Again, that's considered low culture.... I still read literature and look at obscure art, but then I also completely appreciate the trashiest stuff on TV.

*Do cultural associations come into the casting of a project like that?*

If people already have a history of their work, I never disassociate that. I don't assume they're in a vacuum. Specifically for that film I felt like working with a Hollywood actress like Karen, who's not the norm. I basically wrote it for Karen. Then I thought, because it was the first time I worked with a traditional actor, I didn't want to put her with an actor. So, I casted a visual artist who I thought made sense with Karen and Raymond came up because what I'd written was sort of a film noir. They were probably, in my mind, like a dream couple. It's probably the perfect romantic mash-up, so that's what I did. But the piece is





pretty dark and it definitely explores themes of loss and death and love, but yeah, Karen was just such a force.

*One thing that constantly comes up in the critique around your work is sort of a fragility, especially in regards to the body, but even in your collages. I'm fascinated by the concept of body horror, of the fear around being trapped inside a body, this dying matter.*

There's an impulse to self-destruct. Whether we daydream or do a drug or go to a movie, we just want to get away from our heads and experience something other than ourselves. I guess, for me and those collages I was making, you're putting pieces of paper together and cutting things. Those collages I made with velvet have a direct relationship to the body.... You're just so conscious that they're falling apart. Putting those works alongside this large black inflatable that was like two boxing gloves put together to make a heart shape. I think hearing that inflatable in the space, which has this breathing quality because of the air running through it, along with having these fragile collages make you think about bodily deterioration. When that show came out at Marlborough Gallery, it probably makes sense that I was thinking of the body because my father died a couple years before that and that was the first work I made after he passed. With the new glass sculptures that I had just shown at Fortnight Institute, I can see a relationship between them and the inflatable.

*They have an eroticism to them as well I was noticing*  
In what way?

*Well, for one you used words like "FUCK" and "CUNT," but there's something about the design that, for me, recalls a '70s porn logo.*

I designed the font for them and I was definitely looking at those '70s styles where it's kind of curvy and luminous and what you would see on a film poster. I guess you're right it has a connotation because it came from that time.

And then I also think a little bit about my early videos and their titles. This kind of dumb language can be so loaded. And then when we put them in clear glass on the walls it was like, "Oh my god they're so much better now." When they became transparent and voluminous, the feelings of the words totally changed. Not to mention, these sculptures can function as pot pipes. I liked that they're sculptures and they operate visually, but then there's this other thing you can do: you can use them. You can literally use them to escape.

*Do you like the idea of people smoking weed out of your sculptures?*

They don't have to. I mean they could smoke tobacco out of them. You can do whatever you want with them.

*So they really aren't even departures from your videos or collages, because your films work as both entertainment*

*and art, and these sculptures work as art but also as a means of escape. It's still about the transporative nature of art work.*

I like the idea that a word can take you somewhere else. This object can take you somewhere else, depending on what you want to do with it, just like a painting can take you somewhere else. It's sort of looking at that a little bit.

*Something goes through this object to your head and you escape.*

There's a reason why I made those pipes transparent, because they're literally a vessel. You're putting something through it and it's going into your body. There's a sexual and erotic element to it. It just becomes so primal, because it comes down to the body... whether it's bodies of language or your physical body, or just the words themselves, they can transport you. It's like language in a way.



Ruilova, *Yellow flowers. Grave. Procession.*, 2015, paper and velvet, 47 x 32 in.  
Courtesy of the artist and Marlborough Chelsea.



Aida Ruilova, *Raptus*, 2015. Paper and velvet, 79 x 55 inches.  
Courtesy of the artist and Marlborough Chelsea