

Barbara, the pink superheroine.

Reflections on a Self-Portrait Study

Visual Ethnography

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Abstract

Barbara is a reflection. Barbara is a superheroine who defies norms, rules and measures by occupying the space she claims in the world. Barbara is a social critique and at the same time a healing, a way of processing trauma. Barbara is the double of the artist, the anthropologist, and potentially every other woman in the mirror. The artist's gaze and the anthropologist's pen give rise to an exchange of experiences and lived experiences, celebrating an anti-Barbie in a paroxysm of pink.

Keywords

Gender; Beauty norms; Femininity; Anthropology of body; Art-based ethnography.

The author

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The author

Evija Laivina (1978) was born in Latvia. Laivina studied Contemporary Art and Contextualised Practice at the University of Highlands and Islands and graduated in 2019 with BA Hons first class degree. Her photography has been recognized by LensCulture 2018 Portrait Award for her project Beauty Warriors and was nominated for Henri Nannen Award in Germany in 2019. Laivina is a photographer and visual artist. Her practice focuses on identity, mental health, beauty, body image, and social media. She lives in Inverness and works at her studio at Inverness Creative Academy.

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An anthropologist and an artist meet, recognise and confront each other, create a friendship and a collaboration around the theme of the female body. The hegemonic standards of beauty; the treatments women are willing to undergo to achieve unattainable ideals; the desire for acceptance; the fear of difference; the discrimination against non-normative bodies; the violence of aesthetic standards that reflect structures of inequality and differentiation. Since 2021, the award-winning Latvian photographer Evija Laivina (www.evilaivina.com) and I have been moving forward at the same time: her images tell and inspire my work in a visual language; my ethnographic research nourishes and complements her artistic expression: we are dancing to the same rhythm, going in the same direction, with the same theoretical concerns. Evija Laivina is a Latvian-born photographer known for her conceptual and surreal self-portrait photography. She studied Contemporary Art Practice at the University of the Highlands and Islands in Scotland. Her work often explores themes of identity, self-perception, beauty standards, non-traditional beauty routines, and societal expectations, and she frequently incorporates elements of fantasy and whimsy into her images. Through her distinctive visual style and thought-provoking concepts, Evija Laivina has established herself as a notable figure in the realm of conceptual photography. Her work has been exhibited internationally and has garnered recognition for its creativity and social commentary.

Evija Laivina had worked with me on the realisation of the exhibition *Be Fu**ing Perfect*, which took place in Lisbon in September 2022, and a high level of trust had already been established prior to the project. Evija was invited to work with me as a co-author and was involved in the results of the anthropological research. With her photographs, Evija made a significant contribution to changing the way we think about and experience our physicality and our being in the world in the age of perfection. In the process of preparing the *Be Fu**ing Perfect* exhibition that I organised, we began a very close collaboration and discovered that we were constantly mirroring issues, questions and personal experiences. When I was developing my ethnography on minimally invasive aesthetic treatments that can reshape the body into normative shapes and volumes, the photographer who has been working with me in recent years produced the *Beauty Warriors* series, in which she humorously critiques contemporary beauty standards by depicting herself undergoing unconventional beauty treatments using everyday objects. The series challenges viewers to reconsider their notions of beauty and the lengths to which individuals may go to conform to societal ideals. When I started working on fatphobia, the artist on whom I mirrored my research as a visual double of my work produced the *Fat Series*. When I moved on to the subject of ageing, she started the *Silver Series*.

This special issue dedicated to reflections on reflections, with the mirror as the central metaphor and allegory, could only end with a photo essay presenting some images from the new Barbara series by Evija Laivina. Evija and I have decided to work together again, mirroring each other in a female dialogue, in the presentation of the photo essay dedicated to Barbara. Barbara was born from Evija's imagination as her artistic double, at the same time as I started working with *Hacked Barbies*. In my eyes, Barbara is an anti-Barbie: she is a superheroine, a powerful, strong, uninhibited woman. Who is Barbara? Barbara is Evija's alter ego character she has been working with since January 2021, when she returned in her studio after first Covid-19 lockdown. She was not allowed any visitors in studios, so she couldn't work with the model, and she decided to try self portrait photography. Evija tried several different characters until she fell in love with the blond lady who she called Barbara. Evija started with some studio shots, she used studio lights if she worked at night and natural daylight whenever she worked during the day. With some time, she built her confidence and took Barbara out on locations and sometimes she worked with an assistant who helped her to overcome anxiety to work in public.

In the series of photographs, the author tried to understand who Barbara is and what issues she can talk about through this character. Sometimes Evija plans shoots very carefully, controlling how she appears in front of the camera, sometimes she just intuitively works without planning. The photographer puts her camera on a tripod with 50 mm or 17-40 mm lens and she uses a remote controller or phone linked to the camera. The artistic process is very multidimensional in terms of the author's own personal feelings and connection to Barbara. Every photograph carries a narrative, ranging from direct to abstract, often stemming from the author's unconscious mind and shaped by her memories, traumas, or visions of her future self. Some photographs serve as a raw expression of her feelings toward the world and her body as a whole. Describing these experiences in words is challenging; hence, Evija turns to photography and painting as mediums to articulate herself more effectively. Visual expression resonates more strongly with her than verbal communication. Evija often gets questions who her inspiration is. Usually, people mention Cindy Sherman, but she never had close connection to her work. The first self-portrait artists who she was fascinated with was Francesca Woodman. Evija thinks at the moment her favourite artist is Iu Susiraja, her photographs have spoken to her on all levels. But she tries not to study their work too much, fearing from the strong influence. She wants to discover her own visual language.

Barbara represents both the author and someone distinct from her. Evija says to me that human identity can possess multiple dimensions and is not limited to a singular persona. We have the capacity to embody more than one identity simultaneously. For instance, Evija can exist as Evija- her memories and experiences, past, present and future, Evija Laivina the artist who creates her own world, and Evija the mother, wife, daughter, friend. Evija Laivina encompasses both an abstract concept of who she is and a tangible physical presence. Barbara is a part of the artist, yet she exists as a separate entity that Evija can observe from her own perspective rather than hers. There may be terminology or a specific formulation to describe this concept. Evija is describing her lived experience rather than presenting a theoretical framework.

A significant part of the artist's story revolves around dealing with events from her past that have possibly influenced all her relationships and decision-making processes, as well as how she develops trust. Like many women, she too has experienced sexual assault. It feels imperative to address this topic, despite her apprehension about confronting shame and the emotional turmoil it may stir. Even now, recalling these memories evokes physical pain, along with feelings of regret, anger, guilt, and shame, although she understands that none of it was her fault. She has always harboured negative perceptions of her body—feeling like it was dirty, fat, with rough skin, and never truly loving herself despite being a healthy weight with flawless skin and perfect in all ways. She yearned for love, yet struggled to maintain relationships, often placing too much trust in others and not understanding how to stand up for herself. She felt worthless. Art, the act of creation, has played a crucial role in her healing journey. Through Barbara, Evija can translate her emotions into visual form rather than articulating them verbally. She learns to look at herself from a different perspective.

Through photography Evija learns to love her body again. "I must admit - she said - it's not easy sometimes, as I can see ageing process and inevitable body changes. But I can tell I feel much happier now than I was twenty years ago, when I had no confidence and made poor decisions". The process of creating makes her stronger and builds her self-confidence. Speaking out also helps also in recognising her trauma response better and she can take conscious actions and be in control of her emotions. As I have discussed extensively in other works (Pussetti 2013, 2016, 2018), artistic practices can be profoundly therapeutic for individuals who have experienced trauma, including sexual abuse. Engaging in artistic expression empowers survivors by allowing them to externalize their feelings, and to reclaim agency over their experiences and can

aid in the healing journey, offering a safe, metaphorical and non-verbal outlet for expressing complex emotions that may be difficult to articulate verbally. In creating art, individuals can assert control over their narratives, transforming feelings of helplessness into feelings of empowerment and self-determination. As trauma often results in a disconnection from the body, artistic practices that involve body representation or movement can help survivors reconnect with their bodies in a safe and supportive environment, fostering a sense of embodiment and self-awareness. In this particular case, the character of Barbara - created by the artist's imagination - creates new insights, strengths, and resources for coping with the trauma and more empowering narrative of resilience, transformation, overcoming, and hope. Through this photographic exercise, Evija embarked on an intense journey of self-recognition, self-exploration and introspection, inviting the audience to explore their identities, values, and beliefs in relation to their experiences of trauma. By creating art that symbolizes her journey from victimhood to superhero, the artist can visually represent her inner resilience and capacity for growth.

For the anthropologist, observing the work from the audience's point of view, Barbara is a process. An artistic journey and a journey of healing, an act of identity assertion and courage. Barbara is a collective icon that speaks of Evija but also of and to all women. Barbara is a beautiful woman in her forties. She is alive and strong, with her passions, secrets, dreams and insecurities. Barbara is a reflection, she is an avatar, she is a challenge, she is a superheroine. Her surreal world draws the author and the audience in, and sometimes unexplainable things happen. Over the months, Barbara has grown and changed: sometimes Barbara is a self-portrait and sometimes she is another person, and these dynamics can change simultaneously. She is a product of uncertainty, constant questioning and analysis. Looking through Barbara as if in a mirror, Evija perceives things about herself. At the same time, the audience discovers new meanings and possible interpretations. For me, Barbara is a revenge. A revenge like the one we took in the workshops we called Hacked Barbie, which were a useful research tool during the project dedicated to hegemonic ideals of beauty and the violence of the norm. For us, as for many girls in the Euro-American world, the iconic Barbie, with her smooth, slender plastic body, big blue eyes and long blonde hair, was a benchmark of feminine perfection in childhood play: a perfect emblem of hegemonic Euro-centric standards. Slim, toned, long-legged, eternally young, white, blonde, heterosexual, cisgender, hairless, unmarked, slim waisted, high-breasted and statuesque, always wearing make-up, sexy but anatomically incomplete due to her lack of genitals, Barbie has over the years become for many women an emblem of the violence of the normative body and consumer society.

Full of contradictions, she has nevertheless remained present in our imagination as an object of fascination, conflict and resentment. It is certainly this complex relationship with Barbie and the ideal of perfection she represents that gave rise to the series of Barbie Hacked workshops that I conducted with Isabel Pires and Federica Manfredi, inviting more than one hundred and fifty women of different ages, backgrounds and social classes to "hack" or transform a Barbie doll in order to reproduce in the doll's plastic body their own somatic biography, their marks, wounds and histories in the real world. The hacked Barbies have stretch marks, cellulite, wrinkles, birthmarks, spots, hair, scars, fat, tattoos, scars, weak or grey hair, limpness, vitiligo, genitalia, trousers, sanitary towels, a caesarean scar, but they may not have a breast or a leg, for example. We collect Barbies that are transgender, transvestite, elderly, disabled, crying, tired, betrayed, humiliated and scarred by domestic violence. By altering the doll's perfect figure, real women have spoken out about motherhood, depression, social inequalities, labour market inequalities, discrimination, fatphobia, sexual abuse and the racialisation of the body.

The superheroine Barbara that Evija proposes to us overcomes this conflict with Barbie perfection. Barbara emerges from Evija's subconscious, her

intuition, her play. Several layers of meaning are condensed in each shot. Barbara melting with desire for the forbidden fruit; hungry Barbara longing for the denied food; lascivious Barbara using hunger as a metaphor for sexual desire. Barbara is free, with her bright pink clothes, like a superhero costume. . Barbara talks about sensuality, sin, temptation. Barbara shows herself; she reflects herself in several mirror fragments; she hides herself. Barbara moves fluidly between genres, plays with crossing boundaries, appears, disappears and then shows her true nature of fiction, illusion, avatar. Barbara is the anti-norm that proudly defends itself as such. Barbara is herself, but she is also Evija, who gave birth to her, and all the women who recognise themselves in her and follow her, and who, in this process of sharing experiences, continually bring into play their senses, their imagination, their emotions, their collective imaginings and unconscious expectations.

We are constantly bombarded with messages that reinforce the need to 'discipline' and 'tame' the female body - its shapes, weight, smell, fluids, appetites, contours, protrusions, the skin that covers it - in order to bring it closer to an 'ideal' of beauty and femininity that in reality few women fit into. Femininity is a *mise-en-scène* that can only be achieved through disciplinary practices that control the size, shape, surface and movements of the body and display it as an ornamental element. There is a strong normative pressure on women to engage in what we define as 'beauty work', an activity in which one is expected to invest considerable amounts of time and money in order to meet very restrictive standards of beauty which, at least in the European context, value an elegant, pleasing, discreet, delicate figure that occupies a tiny space and does not disturb too much. Few things are still as frightening as a woman who takes up too much space, who eats excessively, who follows her impulses and satisfies her desires, who transgresses the norms, who exceeds the space allotted to her, who does not control her bodily excrescences, who follows the pleasure principle, who has voracious appetites, who goes beyond the rigid limits imposed on her by society.

Barbara occupies the space in the world that she decides to occupy, without confining herself to the narrow space that society reserves for women. Barbara nurtures the hope that, in the near future, we will be able to make our ideals of beauty more complete, more varied and more inclusive, so that everyone can be as they are, in their specificity, feeling beautiful and sensual, loving their own image in the mirror, occupying the space they want in the world with freedom.



Figure 1 Mirror



Figure 2 Mirror and Masks



Figure 3 Reflections



Figure 4 Protection



Figure 5 Silenced



Figure 6 Plastic doll



Figure 7 Good Girl



Figure 8 Identity Crisis



Figure 9 Shadows, reflexions and doubles



Figure 10 Hiding behind curtains



Figure 11 Revealing secrets (drawing the curtains)



Figure 12 The Feast (but not participating in the pleasure)



Figure 13 The Cake (but not participating in the pleasure)



Figure 14 The Apple (the sin, the witch, the temptation)



Figure 15 Ripe cherries (eating them with pleasure)



Figure 16 The costume (release)



Figure 17 Building Barbara



Figure 18 Being Barbara



Figure 19 Mirroring Barbara



Figure 20 The Pink Dream

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