

Ebecho Muslimova with Anna Tome

“Laughter is vulnerable and instinctive, but it’s also communal. I think it unites people because part of finding something funny is assuming others do too.”



Portrait of Ebecho Muslimova, pencil on paper by Phong H. Bui.

Ebecho Muslimova is a Russian-born, New York-based artist known for ever-evolving depictions of her illustrated character, Fatebe (*Fah-tee-bee*), who overflows with physicality and impropriety, free of the anxieties of a socially conscious being. While Muslimova’s work has induced a range of comparisons—from black and white cartoonists such as Jules Feiffer, Al Hirschfeld, and Aubrey Beardsley to underground comic Robert Crumb, the Swedish artist Marie-Louise Ekman, and even painters Paul Gauguin and Carroll Dunham—Fatebe commands a realm entirely her own. I met Muslimova in her Brooklyn studio on the occasion of her institutional debut at The Drawing Center, *Scenes in the Sublevel*, to discuss Fatebe’s past and future, the multitudes she contains, and the political, comic, and sexual imaginations she elicits from viewers.

ON VIEW

The Drawing Center

Scenes in the Sublevel

February 5 – May 23, 2021

New York



Installation view: *Ebecho Muslimova: Scenes in the Sublevel*, The Drawing Center, New York. February 5 - May 23, 2021. Photo: Daniel Terna

Anna Tome (Rail): I thought we would start from the very beginning. You were born in Dagestan, Russia, in 1984.

Ebecho Muslimova: Yes.

Rail: And you grew up in New Jersey?

Muslimova: I grew up in New York. And then we moved to Jersey when I was in high school. But I went to high school here.

Rail: Did you go to LaGuardia?

Muslimova: Yes, I did.

Rail: And then you started drawing very young, as well.

Muslimova: Yes.

Rail: How old were you when you moved to the US?

Muslimova: I was six. I came with my sister and my father. My mom was already here for a couple of years. My little brother was born here. And so we followed a couple of years later.

Rail: You have said that drawing began as a way to process your experiences as a kid.

Muslimova: Yeah, I mean, it was given to me when I was very little. I don't remember ever not drawing. I think it became even stronger after we moved here. With the language barrier, I think I needed to enjoy the fluency and clarity I could practice in drawing.

Rail: Do you think that drawing was a kind of way to process the experience of immigrating so young?

Muslimova: I mean, sure, of course. My mother left first, and we were supposed to follow shortly after. And then with the fall of the Soviet Union at the time, it took almost three years for us to be reunited. So definitely ... having this expressive outlet with drawing was important in my life. There were some drawings from that time, I always drew girls, and there were some drawings at that time where they're just like, alone in the room. I mean, maybe that reflected a sadness.

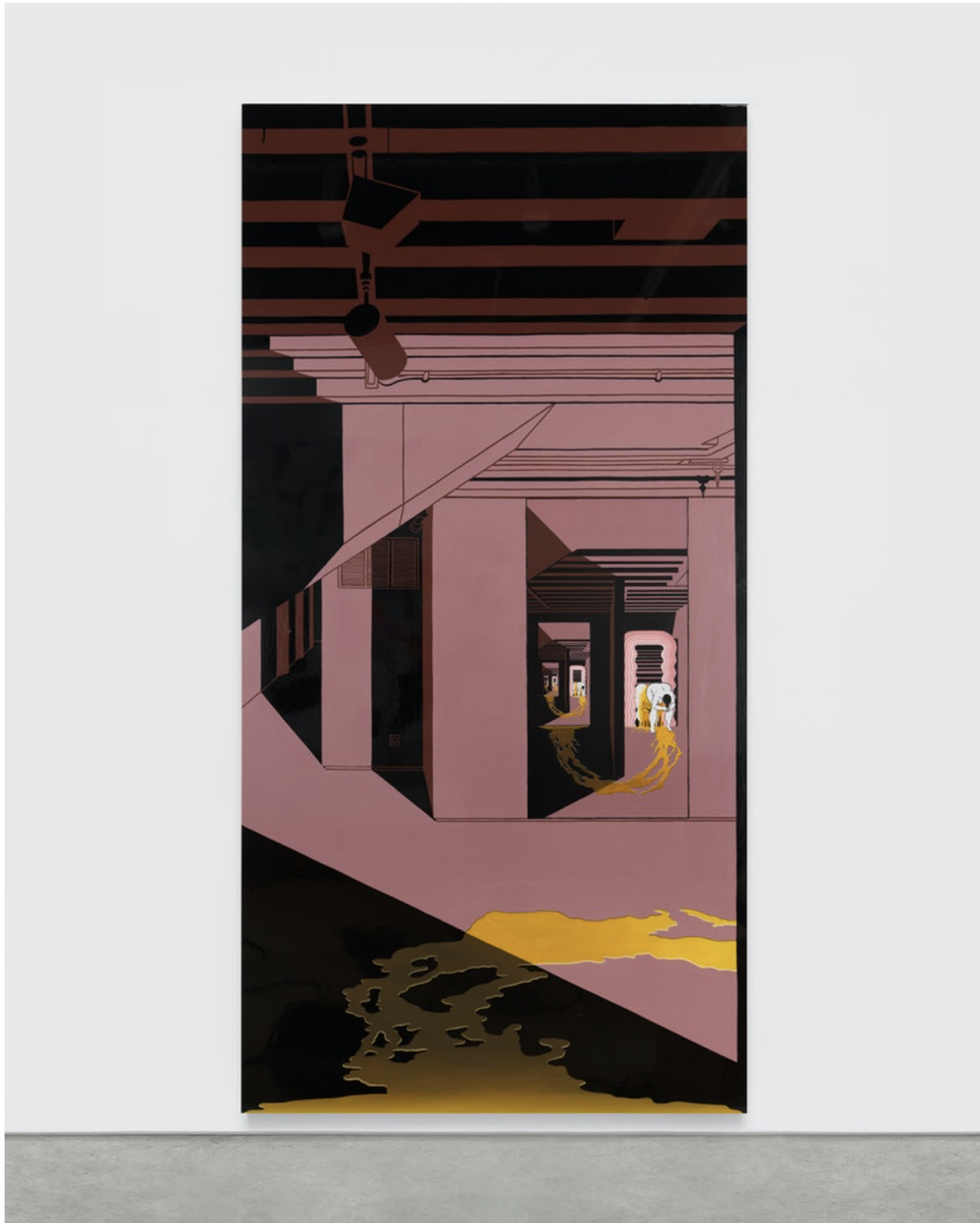
Rail: Can you talk a bit more about that?

Muslimova: I don't remember specifically drawing to process things, but sure, the whole thing was very traumatic, being separated from my mother, and then my parents leaving everything behind. My mother likes to tell a story that I was very hyperactive, like, I could not be slowed down enough to have a moment on the toilet. She couldn't get me to sit to have a bowel movement. So to preoccupy me long enough to take a shit she would give me paper and pencil. I think that's still my relationship to drawing.

Rail: Right, when you've talked about your process of working, it's very corporeal and instinctive. You have said that you don't know when an inspiration is going to come or how many drawings you'll make. It's just a sudden release.

Muslimova: Yeah. [*Laughter*] Definitely, I mean, without being crude, I would describe it as like a constipation until I have to, you know, make it happen. [*Laughter*] But yes, when there is a heaviness in me, I know I haven't expressed something in a while and it's probably time to make a Fatebe. This wasn't always my practice ... there've been times in my life when I drew very infrequently and I don't remember those times being happy.

Rail: Is Fatebe's existence contingent on her scenario or her situation? And do they just pop into your head?



Ebecho Muslimova, *Fatebe Ultrafragola*, 2020. Enamel and oil paint on Dibond aluminum 96 x 48 in. Photo by Matt Grubb//Object Studies. Courtesy of the artist, Galerie Maria Berheim, Zürich and Magenta Plains, NY.

Muslimova: Yes, it's like this divine thing, they pop into my head. I always

Muslimova: Yes, it's like this divine thing, they pop into my head. I always begin thinking that I can avoid certain pains, by, you know, reading something interesting, or just doodling for a while and that somehow the process could be this smooth and easy thing. But nothing ever happens until I'm, like, close to tears. And then—

Rail: While you're drawing—

Muslimova: Yeah, like I have a knot in my throat. And I feel so miserable. And then I'll come up with her. I've been doing it for so long that now I know that it's not the end of the world and that I'm going to get through it and I'm probably going to make a drawing. So I recover easily. I think the experience only teaches you to be able to be more resilient from your own creative labor pains. It doesn't make them go away at all. It's still like this with every project. I feel the black hole of nothing until she kind of appears, somehow. And it's always like a small miracle to me.

Rail: As a final image, they seem so precise. Every line is efficient. I try to imagine how you come up with each one but it's just distinct. It's like the perfect one liner.

Muslimova: Yeah. Well, that's what the project is, that's what I try to do. These more vague abstract ideas come easier. But I feel I haven't achieved a Fatebe until whatever it is, is whittled down into a very direct image.

Rail: Fatebe started as a joke for your friends in art school. She was a line drawing with Sharpie at the beginning. And then you moved on to sumi ink, and then oil and acrylic on canvas in the last two Magenta Plains shows (*TRAPS!* and *2017*) and now at The Drawing Center, she's enamel on Dibond aluminum.

Muslimova: Yeah, she's on the aluminum panels, but they're oil, also. There's a mix of different materials. The enamel just made sense on the aluminum. They felt appropriate for each other.

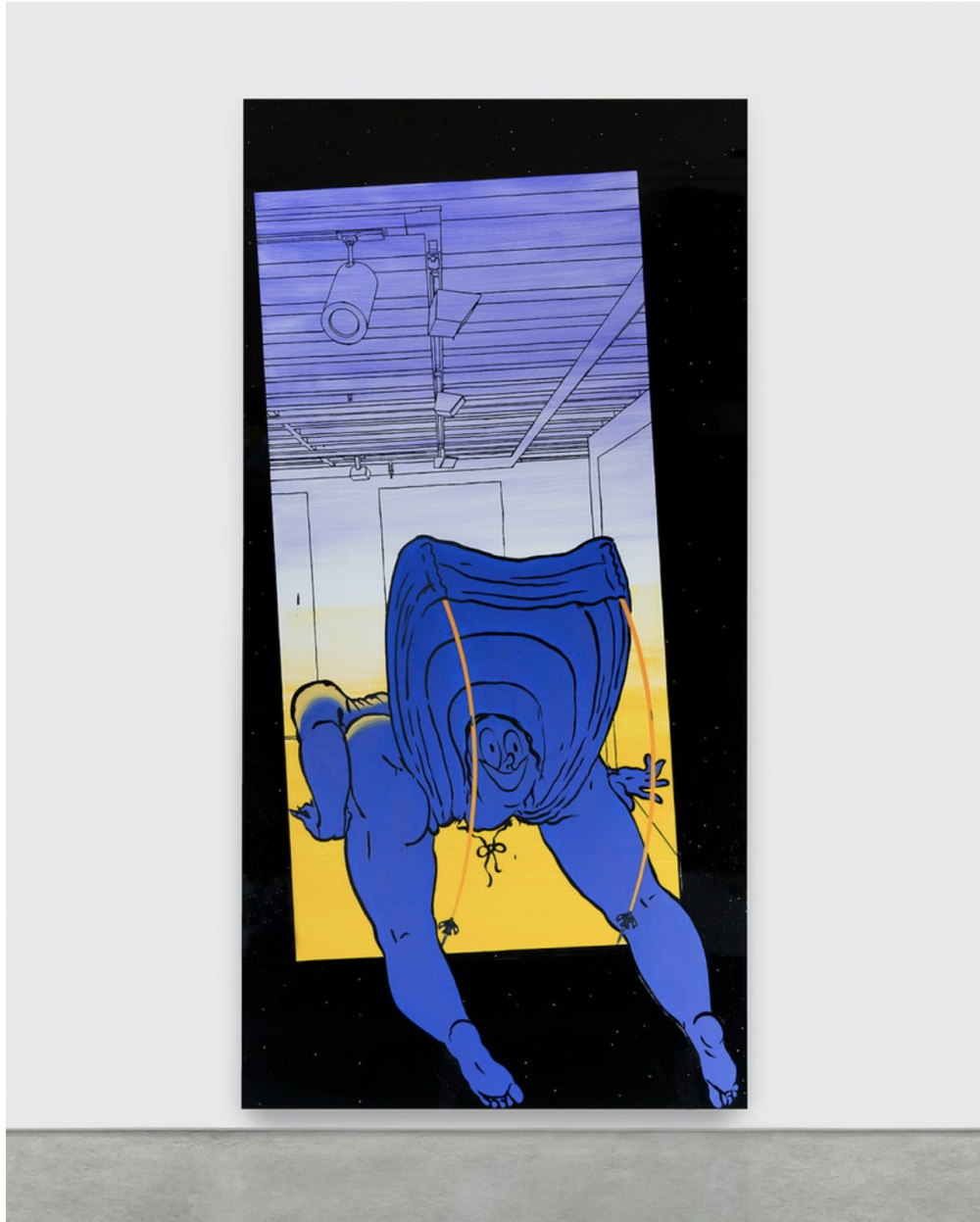
Rail: You've talked about how she is a constraint, to only draw one subject. It seems that in every show the materials expand within that constraint, as if she is pushing you to try different mediums.

Muslimova: Yeah. The constraint began with only her as the subject and it allowed me to develop her without distraction. The tension of being able to use only her forced me to invent and equip her with her qualities. The different mediums I'm using now also do this—like in contrast to the variety around her, Fatebe becomes even more distinct. And then there's the element that she is my crutch; through her I am able to try things that normally I would be very intimidated by. I probably wouldn't, you know, do these big panel paintings. New directions become more approachable.

Rail: There's a lot more color in this show.

Muslimova: Yes, I avoided color for so long that it's very new and fun for me now.

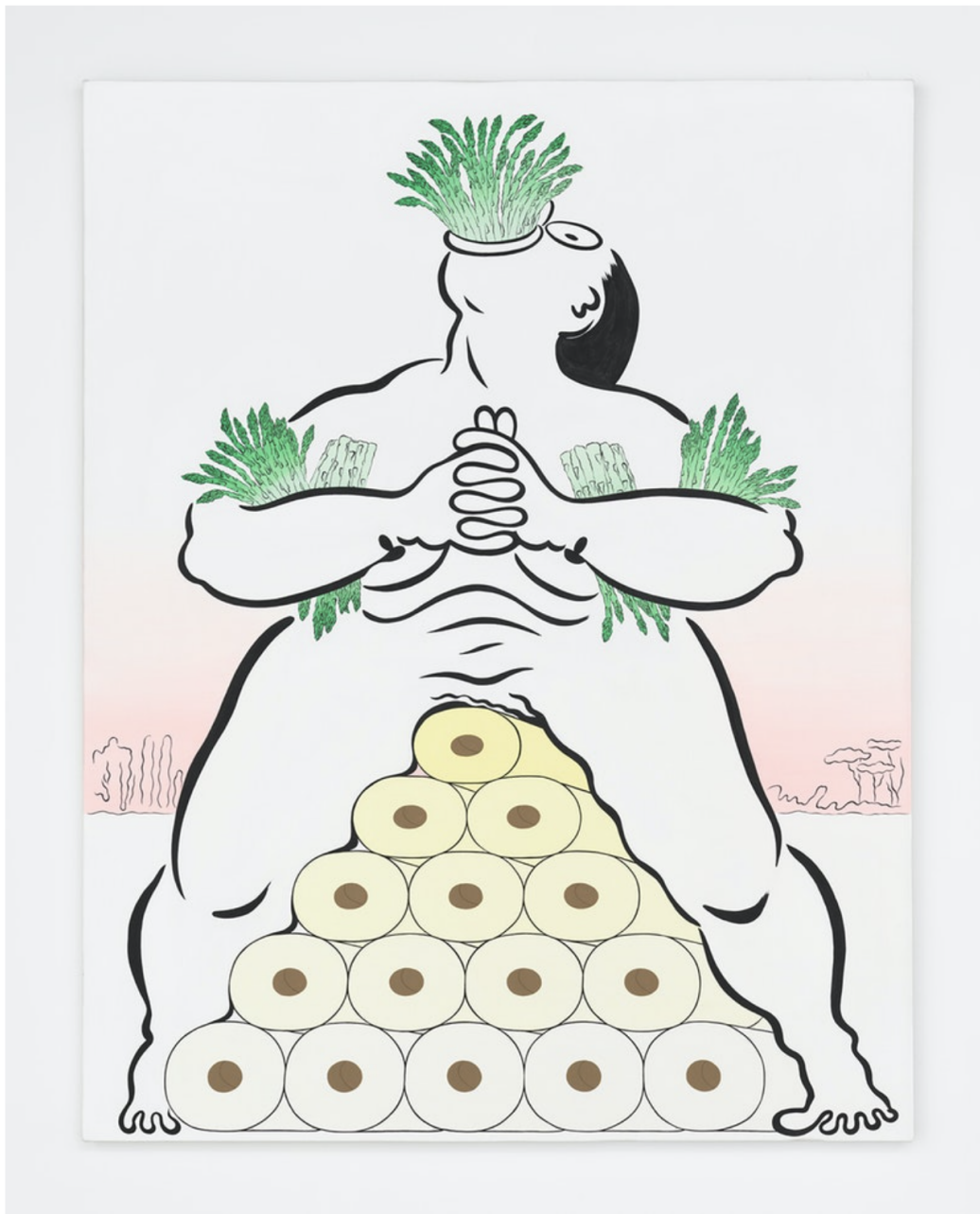
Rail: But it didn't feel contrived in any way. Each scene felt like color was also telling a story that tied into the whole narrative like in *Ultrafragola* (2020), where the magenta background contrasts with yellow streams of urine in a frightening, Kubrick-esque way. And her blue rippled flesh that looks like a camping tent fabric in *Fatebe Out of Space* (2020) affirms the uncanniness of her world.



Ebecho Muslimova, *Fatebe Out of Space*, 2020 Enamel and oil paint on Dibond aluminum 96 x 48 in. Photo by Daniel Terna. Courtesy of the artist, Galerie Maria Berheim, Zürich and Magenta Plains, NY.

Muslimova: I mean, when I started using color with her, it was also kind of the necessity thing, as with the expanding materials, it made sense to me to have color come in as a cameo of its own. So for instance, in the first color drawings for the book *FATEBE Volume 2* (2018), if there had to be a red chair, then the red would come in, and it wouldn't feel excessive. When I first started painting, which is where I allowed myself to use color in my first show at Magenta Plains, there was this painting called *Fatebe Asparagus Pee*,

(2017) which had like three colors in it: green, yellow, and a pink hue in the background. The green being asparagus and the yellow being the piss that she's pissing out. That approach to introducing color made sense to me.



Ebecho Muslimova, *Fatebe Asparagus Pee*, 2017. Acrylic on canvas. 54 × 42 in.

Rail: So again, Fatebe determines what colors and they show up—

Muslimova: Exactly, yeah. I mean I'm looser with it now, but I did need her permission to add color. [*Laughter*]

Rail: As an artistic device, Fatebe has been called your alter ego, but she seems to have a lot more latitude or power compared to a lot of famous artist's alter egos that existed alongside a well-known practice. I'm thinking of Duchamp's *Rose Sélavy*, or even Tony Clifton, Andy Kaufman's brash alter ego.

Muslimova: Fatebe differs from Rose and Tony because she is, in her essence, a drawing; a thing. I never really think of her as an alter ego, more like a self-portrait but through another self, if that makes any sense. Like a surrogate. She isn't another possible version of me and doesn't refer to another human being. The drawing that she is contains a world where her character and a personality exist. But that world is only accessible through the lines of her body. What I mean to say is that she couldn't be anything else but the drawing. This narrow perimeter actually allows for a lot of freedom for her, because this world is separate from me and distinct from my person. She isn't a cartoon version of me—she's an other and is able to operate in a way where anything is possible because of this differentiation from her creator.

Rail: What you said about the line is interesting. It makes me think about how cartoon and caricature are read as more of a gestalt, like, a smile is really a line angled just so—people project laughter or happiness onto it but it's just a line. It's just an absolute mark that has no inherent meaning, to use Benjamin's term, but if you execute in just the right way—

Muslimova: Like the Amazon arrow?

Rail: Yeah, exactly. And it's interesting how critics see different things in her, that she stands for an exuberant body-positivity, or that she is this abject alter ego as a feminist critique, or that she's exploring the Freudian anal stage —

Muslimova: And is stuck in the mirror stage.

Rail: Yeah, that she's in a never-ending Lacanian mirror phase. So I wonder if that's what is so effective about Fatebe as a character, and your use of line, is that viewers project onto her their own political or psychoanalytic interpretations of what she represents.

Muslimova: Yes. Like, I simplify and cartoon and then whatever she has to be becomes non-threatening. When you cartoon something, you can get across some darker ideas. And they're easier to swallow, for better or worse.

Rail: Yeah. I wonder if maybe a naked, fleshy woman especially invites projection. I noticed as well that people nearly always mention specifically that she's naked.

Muslimova: Yeah, it's very funny.

Rail: It made me think the Lynda Nead's book *The Female Nude*, where she argues that the representation of a naked body is profane, sexualized, while the art historical nude is, as in all Renaissance painting for example, dressed in allegory, and therefore desexualized, sacred. So it's interesting that she's naked and not a nude. So, I wonder, as you continue making her, will she stop being "naked"—

yeah, if she'll just become a nude. Or she becomes her own genre.

Rail: Actually, I was going to say, will her nakedness become invisible and just a constituent element of her universe?

Muslimova: Her nakedness is just ... I mean, she is only what she's been shown as. She doesn't exist elsewhere. They're not depictions of someone named Fatebe who lives outside of these images. She's not doing things that we don't know of. So, all of her qualities are her, the black line is black, that is what she is. She is not a depiction of someone.

Rail: You say that she doesn't exist in this world, but she's been discussed as an *Übermensch*. Do you want to talk a little more about that? In a sense, she's very much in this world when you interpolate the surrounding architecture of the gallery into the paintings, especially in *Scenes in the Sublevel*, where the ceiling, walls, and stairs of The Drawing Center basement all appear in the paintings. You've also talked about Fatebe as someone through whom you can experience life vicariously, who has superhuman strength. She also doesn't know shame, or maybe she does and she enjoys it.

Muslimova: I like how I put her in these trials to see what she can withstand, you know? When I say she's bigger and stronger and her superpowers are that she doesn't have like societal shame it's because she's not of here. She did come out at a particularly dark time where I kind of felt like there was nothing to desire ... I felt really impoverished and depleted. I needed to invent and invest in this other being that couldn't be so easily diminished. I think I was in a profound state of lack and she was a funny and tender thing to focus on and to possess. In comparison to the lack, her physical abundance and her emotional joyful energy felt radical to me.

Rail: I wanted to ask about caricature and the comedic. I think Baudelaire first wrote about it as a high art form with the work of Honoré Daumier in 19th century, who he believed was very important because the type of laughter his caricatures elicited made the viewer vulnerable, as they would momentarily lose the self-consciousness that separates us from animals. Is this maybe true with Fatebe?



Installation view: *Ebecho Muslimova: Scenes in the Sublevel*, The Drawing Center, New York. February 5 - May 23, 2021. Photo: Daniel Terna

Muslimova: Laughter is vulnerable and instinctive, but it's also communal. I think it unites people because part of finding something funny is assuming others do too. I try to use forms that are vernacular, I tried to use common references. It's not so much that she's a joke, it's more like the joke is part of her material makeup. And so I'm constructing something using jokes as I'm using lines, as I'm using ...

Rail: Color or composition.

Muslimova: Yeah, so it's not like I'm expressing the joke. The joke is like a component of what makes a Fatebe. It's how she interacts with her audience, similar to the way a clown has to be laughed at. Humor is disarming and that allows for a projection onto her. And this is how she functions I think. I don't even think she's that funny. I don't think that's what the laughter is about. I think it's part of the projection. Or laughter at a joke understood is comforting.

Rail: Your work has been compared to comic artists, Al Hirschfeld, Jules Feiffer—even English children's book illustrator Roger Hargreaves. And on the other hand, John Yau wrote that Carroll Dunham “could learn a thing or two about nuance” from your work. Do you think either of these comparisons misunderstand the project? What do you think is most misunderstood about Fatebe? Are there other artists whose approach you think you emulate?

Muslimova: I can't think of a particular artist's approach that I emulate. For cartoon inspiration I like to look at old satirical political cartoon magazines like *Krokodil* or *Nebelspalter*, among others—the compositions and the humorous handling of heavy subjects is amazing to me. I like specifically that they are from so long ago because if I find a drawing that feels current in emotion and formal composition something must have been done really right.

I try to study it and figure out what it is that makes it seem timeless. As far as cartoonists go, those are who I find inspiring, the ones whose names I don't really know. Probably the thing most misunderstood about the Fatebe project is that she is a comic, or that I am interested in comics.

Rail: You have also described her as curious, optimistic. What else defines her?

Muslimova: Strong, funny. I guess, I mean, she's kind of like a tool. She's kind of like a funnel, you know, she is strong and funny and she has this personality and whatever, but she also has a purpose, as an instrument does. And I think in most of the pieces she's activating something. There's this utilitarian thing to her. I need to think that in the scenarios she is placed her presence is necessary. The scene would kind of fall apart if she wasn't there to receive it with her body. So, she's like an essential wrench or gear or something.

Rail: In the *Artforum* portfolio that you did, she's very architectural, like in *Fatebe Sad Hilltop Hotel* (2018) where she's actually an empty hotel. And in *Fatebe Exhaust* (2016), where there's smog coming out of her genitalia and the oil dripping out of her behind, she's become a vestige of industrialization. Her body is a conduit for society or industry. Sometimes it's simply the gesture of her body, sometimes it's the body becoming something else, augmented.



Left: Ebecho Muslimova, *Fatebe Exhaust*, 2016. Ink on paper. 12 x 9 in. Right: Ebecho Muslimova, *Fatebe Sad Hilltop Hotel*, 2018. Ink on paper. 12 x 9 in.

Muslimova: Yes. When she morphs into these places, structures, she's expressing a longing. You know that feeling of nostalgia that gets so intense that you sense it in your body? And sometimes her morphing is just identification with an emotionally charged structure.

Rail: What does it mean to you that her body is her main form of communication, or I guess, her only form of communication?

Muslimova: Right, 'cause she's mute also. It just means that she is a drawing and it communicates visually, formally, in line and composition. I'm less comfortable with words than I am with images, I feel more articulate in drawing. She kind of pays homage to that—to my ability and preference. And since she does what I'm not allowed, she can be comfortably silent and like, turn into a building if she wants to express some nostalgic love.

Rail: Do you think she will ever become a moving image?

Muslimova: I don't think so. The angle that she is positioned in and looked at is part of that particular Fatebe. Right now I can't imagine how to achieve that with animation.

Rail: The stills generate a feeling of closure, especially because of her gleeful facial expression. You know that she's going to survive whatever scenario she's in.

Muslimova: Yeah, because she's going to survive whatever. That's how she helps me; I can explore through her without fear. The fear, I mean, of purposelessness. Because I have a need to place her, to make her show me something.

Rail: She's your own visual language.

Muslimova: Exactly, yeah.

Rail: Are you in psychoanalysis?

Muslimova: Yeah. But mine is like a lot more casual, my shrink. [*Laughter*] Sometimes we talk about Fatebe, but we don't do the whole dream thing.

Rail: It's interesting to think about her as an interlocutor between your subconscious and your waking life. That she helps you explore or express things, and I guess humor is part of that too. When Freud talks about humor, a laugh is a subconscious release akin to dreaming.

Muslimova: And it's like an anxiety that you're laughing, that you're like shaking out of your body.

Rail: Exactly. Like a buildup and a release. Maybe she does it for you and also for the viewer who can extrapolate their own narrative.

Muslimova: I mean, it has to do with how particularly miserable I feel while coming up with one. Then the joke, the kind of neat one-liner, is the release for me also. I mean, it's funny, it's not funny, but it arises from such an uncomfortable place that definitely, she's letting me kind of work out some sort of subconscious something.

Rail: Otherwise it wouldn't be so intense to bring her into being.

Muslimova: It's as intense as it needs to be—the suffering and reward of making a perfect Fatebe is part of my love for this project.