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Ilana Harris-Babou Turns Wellness Trends into Surreal Videos and Sculptures

● Alina Cohen Mar 12, 2020 12:55pm   



Ilana Harris-Babou, installation view of "Decision Fatigue" at Hesse Flatow, 2020. Photo by Jenny Gorman. Courtesy of Hesse Flatow.

Last summer, Ilana Harris-Babou became an amateur anthropologist. To make work for her current exhibition at Chelsea gallery Hesse Flatow, the Western Massachusetts–based artist relocated to live among her chosen population: the women of Amagansett, the Long Island town just past East Hampton. To observe these characters in their natural habitat, Harris-Babou attended The Class, a fitness workshop promoted by Gwyneth Paltrow and her lifestyle brand Goop. “You’re basically doing calisthenics,” Harris-Babou recently said of her experience. “There’s this pop music playing and it gets louder and louder, and the instructor is screaming at

you, ‘Go deeper! What is that thing inside of you? Follow it!’ Those vague self-help phrases.” Eventually, the whole class begins screaming—an exercise intended to help participants find release.

Throughout her multidisciplinary art practice, Harris-Babou often mimics a particular brand of whiteness—she says she’s “almost in white lady drag or white CEO man drag.” Adopting these personas, she investigates cultural preoccupations with cooking shows, self-improvement, design, and the beauty industry. Perhaps best known for her video that was featured in the 2019 Whitney Biennial, Harris-Babou has developed an endlessly curious, uniquely millennial voice that allows her to explore topics ranging from reparations to yoni eggs, while maintaining a recognizable style. Her disparate interests, in fact, lead back to one central theme: the folly of aspiration.



Ilana Harris-Babou, still from *Decision Fatigue*, 2020. Courtesy of the artist.

For her Hesse Flatow show, “Decision Fatigue” (up through March 21st), Harris-Babou transformed the gallery into a faux boutique. The front wall is painted champagne pink, evoking the flagship store of millennial beauty brand Glossier. Atop light birch plinths, the artist placed ceramics in the shapes of lotions, potions, soap dishes, jade rollers, and yoni eggs. Her resin “soaps” are embedded with surprising elements such as car air freshener, Cheeto puffs, and printed pink text that reads “Little Trees.” Cacti and waxy red flowers—only the most Instagram-

friendly flora—emerge from ceramic planters. Pink and purple crystal lamps studded with porcelain casts of nail polish bottles greet the viewer at the show's entrance.

While the beauty and wellness industries are ripe for satire, Harris-Babou takes a funny, gentle, non-judgmental approach to her critique. “I think lovely products are all the ads I get on Instagram,” she said. “I’m definitely a target. All the things I think about in my work are things that I’m seduced by.”



Ilana Harris-Babou, installation view of “Decision Fatigue” at Hesse Flatow, 2020. Photo by Jenny Gorman. Courtesy of Hesse Flatow.

Decision Fatigue (2020), a new video by Harris-Babou, plays on the pale pink wall. The viewer watches as Sheila, the artist’s mother and a frequent collaborator, narrates a surreal makeup tutorial. The whole film was ad-libbed, with Harris-Babou feeding her mother “scenarios” for riffing. In the film, Sheila says she’s going to be sharing a “daily beauty routine for not breastfeeding,” then later reveals that “when you breastfeed, your life force is being taken away.” Sheila also gives instructions for creating and using a Cheeto face mask. She rubs a paste of the chemical-rich snack food into her skin. Far from the feel-good, can-do YouTube video, Sheila’s tutorial features dark undertones about femininity and motherhood. The close-ups on her Cheetoed face can be difficult to watch.



Ilana Harris-Babou, still from *Decision Fatigue*, 2020. Courtesy of the artist.

Sheila also played the central role in Harris-Babou's films *Finishing a Raw Basement* (2017), which took the form of a wry HGTV DIY video, and *Cooking with the Erotic* (2016), in which mother and daughter prepare a meal that comingles art supplies with eggs.

Using her mother as her subject, in video after video, helps prevent Harris-Babou's work from adopting a biting, sardonic edge: Her work is often an intimate, familial collaboration with a sense of humor. "So much of what I love about Ilana's work, in terms of the broader landscape of contemporary art, is how funny she is," said Whitney curator Rujeko Hockley, who co-curated the 2019 Whitney Biennial with Jane Panetta.



Ilana Harris-Babou, still from *Human Design*, 2019. Courtesy of the artist.

For the Whitney Biennial, Hockley and Panetta commissioned a new film from Harris-Babou, *Human Design* (2019). The piece was inspired by the Whitney’s neighbor, the high-end furniture store Restoration Hardware, which has a clean, spare aesthetic and features foreign objects—tribal masks, a stone sphinx, ceramic vessels, a spiky necklace—that aren’t for sale. Harris-Babou chose to explore ideas about disenfranchisement and design. In the film, the artist plays a researcher who travels to Senegal, attempting to find the person who created the objects, whom she calls the “source.” Yet the journey may be more about self-discovery than historical knowledge: Black-and-white shots of the alleged artisan, also played by Harris-Babou, reveal that the maker looks exactly like the researcher herself.

Hockley admires Harris-Babou’s ability to consider complex, historical topics while poking fun at a furniture store, or, as in *Reparation Hardware* (2018), a DIY television show. “With reparations, you can take the past into your home tastefully,” the artist’s voiceover says in the latter film. Hockley noted that Harris-Babou is able to toy with “home improvement, upward mobility, and HGTV,” while demonstrating how those topics intersect with “discussions of land and property, economic class, and manners.” The film implies there’s no simple cure-all for centuries of mistreatment—reparations can’t erase the history of slavery and prejudice.



Ilana Harris-Babou, still from *Decision Fatigue*, 2020. Courtesy of the artist.

Harris-Babou imbues her work with strangeness with heartfelt emotion. She noted that *Decision Fatigue* deals with aging and mortality, as Sheila's health has declined throughout the years they've worked together.

Sheila's vulnerability will be central in a forthcoming video that Harris-Babou is making for "After the Plaster Foundation," a group exhibition that opens at the Queens Museum on April 5th. The artist will tackle the issue of deed theft, a predatory practice in which schemers attempt to trick people into signing away their property. Sheila lives in Crown Heights—a Brooklyn neighborhood with rapidly increasing property values—and according to Harris-Babou, people leave her mother handwritten notes, call her, and send her mail, trying to get her to unwittingly relinquish ownership of her home. "There's this dependence on older people feeling lonely, being receptive to this kind of attention," said Harris-Babou. Wellness videos and beauty marketing, on the other hand, promise a fountain of youth and quick fixes for health.



Ilana Harris-Babou, still from *Decision Fatigue*, 2020. Courtesy of the artist.

Harris-Babou traces her relationship with makeup back to two childhood memories: Her sister used to put lipstick on her, treating her like a doll, for entertainment purposes; and she once put toothpaste on her face, hoping to blend in with her white classmates.

In this way, Harris-Babou's work rebels against her earliest experiences with beauty—she's in control of her own narrative, celebrating herself and her own perspective through funny, honest, and provocative work. That's something the rest of us could aspire to.



Alina Cohen is a Staff Writer at Artsy.

Correction: A previous version of this article referred to Harris-Babou's upcoming residency at Pioneer Works as a show. The text has been updated to reflect this change. The article also misstated that the title of an upcoming exhibition at the Queens Museum; the correct title is "After the Plaster Foundation."