



INTERVIEW: LIZZI BOUGATSOS ON ART'S COMING SHIFT IN CONSCIOUSNESS

*The planet, gender, and garbage according to the muse of
New York's underground*



"For Thorton," Tree plant, hair from Ashland Mines, canvas tote bag, sage, 81 x 37 x 37 inches

Lizzi Bougatsos doesn't believe in waste. A scattering of Christmas tree ornaments with miniature dildos affixed to them cutely adorns a table in her studio share in SoHo. A natural junk collector (and an artist disinclined to working in a studio at that), she's using up the materials she already has on hand. When the front woman of experimental band Gang Gang Dance is done working with these items, she intends to make art with different sorts of objects: water, ice, trees. There's a dilemma in the process, however, because Bougatsos' understanding of beauty goes beyond the formal properties of material and the conceptual concerns of vision into the ethics of material itself. In other words, in a capitalist economy, art is an expression of consumerist waste, so how to make art that is both a product of creative human construction, but not another excessive object in an economy of exploitation, gluttony, and squander? Bougatsos has some ideas.

The first time I encountered Bougatsos' work was via the Dikeou Collection when curator Devon Dikeou, in collaboration with Artpace's Mary Heathcott, exhibited a trio of 2010 pieces in group exhibit, "Swapmeet" at Artpace in San Antonio. I was surprised at the emotion – a sort of girlish, bitchy glee – that the objects elicited from me. A FOR RENT sign with "my pussy" scrawled in the entry field, Tracy Morgan raising his eyebrows on a *Cop Out* poster through a vanity light stand, and "In god we bust" scribbled in neon green lights. So irreverent and unpredictable, and most of all, I recognized I thought, the too little expressed reaction of contemporary female identity to the mainstream smorgasbord of celebrity obsession and perpetually confusing/infuriating onslaught of depictions of femaleness. However, Bougatsos' work is shifting to reflect a shift in consciousness she anticipates for culture.

Interview by Rachel Cole Dalamangas

You're known as an icon of the underground and some of your artwork appropriates/parodies the cult of celebrity. I'm curious about your thoughts on the relevance of subculture for unrepresented voices and perspectives?

I'm really excited about the youth now. I believe that every 10 years there's a revival in some way whether it's in music or art. The other day, my friend had a bunch of *New York Times*-es from the past month. I went through them all and there was a designer that I knew, there was a musician that I spoke to in a bar recently. They all know Gang Gang, but now they're making their own albums and they're in the *Times*. They're making their own clothes and they're in the *Times*.

I don't believe in hierarchy. When I would curate art shows, one way that I would deal with the underground is put in artists that were emerging or never represented. For example, Rita Ackerman and I used to curate a lot of those and we would put a Louise Bourgeois next to a photographer that never showed in a gallery before – KatijaRawlesknown as a fashion photographer, her work was sort of similar to Marilyn Minter. There was another photographer that was an underground figure in New York for a really long time. Her work is incredible – Robin Graubard.

My whole goal in curating art shows was to never have anyone on a pedestal and keep everything on the same plane. And I feel that way about music too.

I never believed in idolizing somebody higher than yourself. I like to deface celebrity a lot because there are all the politics that come with it that are so gross and hard to deal with.

I would always play the show and then do the merch table after the show. The only reason I didn't last tour is because I'm getting older and I'm getting tired. But if somebody asks me to come out and sign things and talk to people, I'll always do that.

I don't know. I'm excited about the underground in music.

With digital media's impact on culture, is there a scene that is genuinely underground anymore?

I think the underground is equivalent to selling out. I don't know if it exists. I mean I think there's underdogs. I think there's people that are coming up that need to be represented, but they don't stay underground very long now because of the internet. It's like two walls that face each other and cancel each other out.

For example, in the past, when we didn't have the internet, you got a music contract for a tampon commercial. I always say tampon because Gang Gang was always like well the only thing we'd do is a tampon commercial, like we won't do a car commercial. But because everything is so free, now you do those commercials. You're forced to kind of do them. You're forced to take that car commercial. Because there is no idea of selling out. With the internet, there's survival too. One has to learn not how to be watched. Identity theft is huge.

Censorship was a big issue that came up like three years ago. That was going to be a big issue. We're seeing it on like Facebook and even imagery on Instagram, but now everyone has a voice. If you want to be in a movie, just make your own. If you want to make a song, just put it on iTunes. There's no need for a label even anymore.

What are the underdogs?

They're the ones that haven't been discovered yet, have the drive and will be a part of culture.

I think culture is a force, but I think that a big part of it is common sense. You need street cred. You know what I mean?

You gotta work for it and you gotta have common sense. If you're from New York, it helps. If you act in a mindful way, you will be rewarded.

I went to this art lecture once. Jerry Saltz was giving a lecture about how to make it in the art world. He had this pie diagram and it was really funny because being in the right place at the right time was a big part of that pie, like 65%. Like Yoko Ono when she met John Lennon – as far as I'm concerned *he* was in the right place at the right time. It's really interesting, like, there's about 65% of life that is about chance. 65-85%. I think he said luck went hand and hand with chance. I've heard actors say that too.

What were your ambitions when you were 19? How did you perceive the career in front of you when you started out?

I've been thinking about it recently. I perceived it exactly as I perceive it now. I remember my girl friend was dating this hot Columbian guy whose dad owned a deli and they had to move out of their deli and they put all this stuff in the garbage. I went into the garbage and I took out this huge tube and I took it home, coiled it up and put it on a piece of whiteboard and that was the sculpture that I made. I remember taking it off of the board and placing it on the beach and placing it on the lawn. I just believed in performance ever since I was in that garbage. It was sticky. It was filthy. There was, like, Coke syrup. I remember everyone saying, "That's disgusting. That's garbage." There was nothing gonna stop me from making performative land art out of this sticky, disgusting tube.

Later on, I met Pat Hearn who was one of my major mentors and she was the first person that ever said anything to me about my art. She was dying of cancer at the time and she was so thin. She looked kind of like a shaman. She had this huge turban on and she said, "You

remind me of Joan Jonas." She said, "You work with error." And that's kind of why I kept working. Then I met this other artist, Suzanne Anker. I met her in New York when I was in college. She said to me, "This is sculpture" [*throws a no. 2 pencil in an arc.*] That was another thing that made me, it just stuck. Every single place that that pencil went in the air from the moment that it was kinetically and chemically in motion, it was performative sculpture.

Have you ever doubted your practice as an artist?

In 2009, I had an art show with James Fuentes and I got really upset. I didn't have an art studio. I had to borrow one for a month. I never had an art studio. I always made art out of my apartment. I wanted to make this sculpture of a tongue that moved so I went to the sculpture store and I bought this material, it was \$100, and I brought it to the studio and I read the directions and I was like, "Why am I buying this \$100 material to make sculpture with when I have no money to eat anything?" So I brought it back and ever since then I've been really skeptical of what I put out. I just didn't want to contribute to anymore waste. Waste is such a huge problem for me. I recycle almost everything. Everything that I own, I usually put into my artwork if I don't sell it or give it away.

Three years later when I saw Urs Fischer make that tongue sculpture, I said to my friend Spencer, "I wanted to make that and I didn't make it. Did you ever get upset that you didn't make something and then you see someone else do it?" And he said, "Yeah, sometimes I get upset, but they did it first."

How do you come through the other side of doubt?

I think it's just a survivalist thing. I mean that's the only way I've been able to make art or even music. I've always had a purpose for making music. With art, it's really a survivalist thing. I get upset when I see really crappy art, but I don't know why I keep making it. Because people really like it and I do get joy out of it, and I think that's the communion side of my makeup. I really enjoy when people are laughing.

There's a strong element of provocation in your work – an intense emotional charge and sense of humor coming out it.

That's the performative side, I think. I think that it's about gratification really. I think I get a lot of gratification from taking a knife and stabbing it into the wall and hanging pearls from it or a microphone and having that be my self-portrait. If it's visually balanced, then I'm so satisfied.

You make work pretty spontaneously?

I have a tough time laboring. I am not even a studio artist. The fact that I have this studio, I mean, it's pretty tough for me. This isn't the way that I work.

Lately, I've been dealing with more physical forces of nature. Like ice or plants, dirt. Those have been the driving forces for me lately. You can't own them. If you do own a plant, like the piece I put in my last show, a tree, when someone bought it, I gave them instructions on how to take care of it. I believe in making things that grow or that you can't really own anymore. Like, I'm a feather. That's how I'm thinking about my art right now.

You mentioned your problem with waste and described in other interviews your interest in a "shift in consciousness." What is art's and music's role in a shift in consciousness?

I mean people put so much money into the fabrication of things that aren't beautiful. Everything that exists in nature is already beautiful. That's the dilemma I'm having now. I almost believe that art is the anti-Christ of what is beautiful. It's basically a gluttonous production of waste and more garbage and more things that we're going to have to bury. This is a dilemma that I face almost every few years.

I remember I was on tour and we were in Ireland and there were these stone statues facing the sea at the top of this mountain. And I thought, "This is the kind of art that will withstand the test of time. This is the kind of art that never goes away. This is the kind of art that you remember." You can't throw it away and it will erode naturally. When I look at those, I never want to make art again.

In the year I've been doing these interviews, one question I've asked almost every artist is do you think the world is ending because of environmental problems with material?

No.

I'm hoping that there will be a shift of consciousness that's more mindful and more humane. The truth is there's always evil because there's always holiness and there needs to be a balance of yin and yang. I don't think the world will end, I did almost think that for the Mayan calendar and I was a little bit scared, but I knew that that just meant that things were going to change and I was just hoping for a mindful consciousness among humans.

In a mindful world, where do you think art would be situated?

I have no idea because evil still holds the leash of art.

I mean this all goes back to how I studied ceramics for eight years. I knew that clay was from the earth and it was the only thing that wouldn't pollute the earth, it would just go back into the earth. So I never considered myself making waste when I was working in clay because it could be recycled. When I did work in clay, I also believed that medium was equivalent to those sculptures on top of the hill.

You're also considered a fashion icon. How does fashion matter to your art and music or vice versa?

I'm in this position where one of my closest friends, you know, she's a fashion icon and she designs cloths. I get all of her hand-me-downs and it's funny because sometimes I'll have these really incredible things, but it's not about having these incredible things, it's about playing with them. I think this is where being an underdog really comes into play. You'll see this hat at Balenciaga and it will be like a helmet with a crazy visor on it and there's no way you could afford it, but if you're creative you can recreate it, some version of it. So then you don't have shell out \$8,000 for this hat.

Some designers make the most beautiful art, wearable art and its so linked with performance. I loved when Björk wore that swan. I even liked when Lady Gaga came out of the egg. I love those crossovers. I love erratic creativity that sort of disturbs. I've been called a muse by a lot of different people over the years and I've been told that I inspired this and that. My friend that I was talking about likes to watch me get ready.

It's interesting because fashion also involves the use of material – "wearable art" as you called it.

Exactly. But it's the man too. You have to know how to wear it.

You're referred to as a feminist frequently and there is this irreverent revelation of female identity happening in your work, but you never actually describe yourself as one.

Well, I do identify, but I never believed in calling myself a feminist. The people that I've always admired or wanted to be more like were men because somehow they always get a break. It seems like the women who get the break to be in the group show with the men are really in the show because they're not a force, they're not a threat. I've always considered myself a humanist instead of a feminist. I admire people who earn their keep. I don't care whether they are men or women.

I do don't think it's easy for women. We're a threat. We're able to create physically and a man can't do that so I think that opens us up to having more psychic powers or something. We sort of see in circles, like mother universe, and men see in squares. That is why they so-called "succeed." Most of the men in my life have A LOT of female in them. That's why they wanted to do a tampon commercial, he he.

What are you working on now?

One piece is a sculpture that I'm envisioning right now that will go in somebody's house, it's a tree sculpture. The other piece that I was making was supposed to be a waterfall made out of ice, but I couldn't make it happen. I got a movie job and I acted in a movie.

Photo courtesy of James Fuentes.

See more photos of Bougatsos' recent work at [James Fuentes](#).

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This article originally featured three different works by the artist from 2010. The article has been updated with a photo that reflects her more recent work.

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