

INTERVIEW: GUENDALINA CERRUTI AND NATALIA GRABOWSKA

Youth in 2D

25 November 2022

To coincide with her solo exhibition 'Ohh... Youth' at V.O Curations running from 11 November – 17 December 2022, the artist Guendalina Cerruti discusses her practice and influences for the new bodies of work. From TikTok videos to the works of Mike Kelley, the artist weaves these references together in her works to explore youth, pop culture and construction of identity in today's world.

Natalia Grabowska: *I'd like to start by talking about the main themes in your practice, where and how do you start?*

Guendalina Cerruti: It changes constantly as I go along – as my work changes, so do the themes. Recently, youth has been something I've been exploring – youth/adolescence in general terms, but also specifically in relation to the construction of identity – including fashion, trends, social media – and how it relates to contemporaneity. I've been interested in looking at what youth is like in our time, what are the issues that concern young adults and why is this identity conversation so present? Pop culture is of course also a big reference for me, an inspiration.

NG: *It's interesting also as we are probably the last generation that grew up without social media. Pop culture was present through different outlets, but we didn't have these platforms, to which we could also contribute, they all came as we became adults.*

GC: I feel all of this changed so rapidly and is having a very big impact. I was talking to a friend last night about this and how 'youth' is almost this single age which covers everyone until they're 70 or 80 years old. Right now, there just isn't so much difference between ages – everything is very blurred, like the border between childhood and adolescence. When you look at TikTok now, you see children doing things that we couldn't imagine doing at their age. At eight or nine, I would probably sit in a room and draw dolls. It's not only about ageing, but about youth being a totally different thing now. It's interesting how it became this one big group.

There's also a different relationship between what is the real experience and what is an image – a 2D experience that predominantly becomes the identity. Youth is very much 2D and I reference images that are very flat. They may not necessarily be what is the real experience.

NG: *This construction of identity you just mentioned, and the 2D image one can create, leads me to think about your works that are in the exhibition, 79 Brewer St, 12 Mount St, 400 Oxford St, 2-3 Peter St (all 2022) – a series of paintings of branded t-shirts, arranged in a grid.*

GC: A t-shirt is such a symbolic item. It's the plainest things that become the most symbolic, because you must add value to it through your imagination. It has such an important history, because it's been used for so many different reasons, but now it's for a very flattened purpose, which is to become an advertisement.

Looking at this trend of brand street style, it's interesting how the logo t-shirt trend started with this necessity of being yourself or expressing yourself, a need to associate yourself with a certain subculture. Those trends get quickly absorbed by capitalism and become a product that you buy and, in turn, you become a very generic 'non-persona', a 'de-personalised being'. The grid t-shirt canvases are an attempt to make a portrait of a generation, and how I relate to it.



Guendalina Cerruti, 'Ohh... Youth!'; Installation View.

NG: *When seen individually, they seem to represent an identity, but seeing them altogether, they kind of lose their value.*

GC: That was a very important aspect of the work. The t-shirts here are objects, without a face or body, but there is a direct relation to the body. Through the repetition, you almost get lost, as the work becomes this abstract colour chart.

A lot of people have also commented on how real the paintings look, and that you have to get close to them to see that they are paintings. They are all individually made and then stitched together into a grid. It was never really my intention to make a replica that tricks you into thinking that it's a real t-shirt, but it was important to give depth to these objects, instead of creating another 2D image.

NG: *They are almost like sculptures, rather than paintings, because they don't have the flat surface that paintings would usually have. In your work, you move between mediums and materials and mix them up. Could you tell me more about the materiality in your work?*

GC: I sometimes wonder if what I do is painting, as my practice is based on a composition of objects or assemblage, but I still have a relation to painting in a way that is an expression of imagination. I'm interested in the potentiality of things, and how they can manifest themselves in a painting or a sculpture. Somehow, it's very conceptual, but also my practice is very much rooted in making, I try to really exhaust the process.

It's very important for me to have an intuition, which is an integral part of my process. It's part of my interest in having this experiential knowledge – the importance of experiencing things – and still being in touch with your gut instinct and intuition, which I feel is what you lose first when everything is given to you. I keep referencing the digital world, which is one that constantly gives to you and feeds you. Through that, you may lose touch with this magical relation to things and ideas – learning by yourself, instead of Googling, for example.

NG: *It's the access that the digital world has enabled to, what seems like, endless knowledge and experiences. Rather than trusting ourselves, or even trying, failing and learning, frequently*

the thinking, analysing and processing is done for us. It's all out there, and you learn from this anonymous pool of experiences.

GC: This idea of a shared experience is exactly what interests me. It should be an experience that brings commonalities – feelings like empathy and connection. The need for connection seems to be growing even though we are part of this 'digital' shared experience. Connection has never been so easily accessible, and yet we also probably never felt more isolated. There is also a joyful, pleasant and fascinating side of the digital world and social media. In my work I never want to flatten or take out these complexities of human existence.

NG: *The work doesn't come across as moralistic, but rather one that asks questions. It points to the fact that we operate in this 2D world anyway, even if you're not an active user of social media. It doesn't matter, as the fact that everyone around you uses these platforms, will shape your reality too. If everyone looks at similar things, shares a certain knowledge, experience or follows a trend, then the conversations will end up oscillating around these topics.*

GC: Definitely. I am actually a very active consumer of these ideas. I also really like clothes and I find myself indulging in behaviours that could be criticised or deemed problematic. Having these two worlds – the digital and the experiential – is also a self-reflecting process. A lot of self-reflection happens during the moments when you disconnect and have the time to disengage, not look at your phone. For me, it's when I walk the streets, or am on the tube, which is also interesting because it's always a public place where I'm probably reflecting the most.

NG: *That leads me to the work Hailey (Sweet as Heaven) (2022), where these two worlds really come together. It features a screenshot from the TikTok account of the celebrity Hailey Bieber, but also a reflection of you in a shop window, on your walk to the studio, among other elements.*



'Hailey (Sweet as Heaven)', 2022, Acrylic, photo transfer, rhinestones, spray paint, coloured pencils and markers on canvas.

GC: That work is like a mind map. The different images and elements are positioned to visualise some sort of thought process. Those images are from passing by clothing stores on Carnaby Street every day, photographing them and having a relationship to them. I was interested in the sexual message on those t-shirts and the target of this shop being very young teenage girls, and the controversy of the brand having a very white and skinny image and producing clothes in just one size. It's a very toxic and complex behaviour. I was also curious about the aesthetic and how the ideas of the brand were expressed through it. This work ended up addressing the concerns about what are the expectations of teenage girls, which is to have perfect skin, to be skinny, to fit in one size, to be subjected to someone else's gaze, and to be sexual but also innocent at the same time. There is also a note reminiscing Christianity. Altogether, it's a very complex mix of ideals, that are very old but also still very present – and that was just something that is in the window for everyone to see.

NG: *It's the innocence that is being desired and a type of beauty that is culturally associated with it. It is excluding right from the start, very much not welcoming any diversity. It's not actually one size fits all, it's one size that fits the people we want it to fit.*

GC: Absolutely, it is very absurd and conforming. The ancient juxtaposition between the good and bad is still ruling most of people's lives and in various aspects. I don't mean to reference it in religious terms, but it was important to address it with this iconography of devils and angels, which is also part of that brand's visual identity choices – to use the angels and devils in that specific way.

NG: *The portrait of Hailey Bieber could be read as her impersonating that perfect young innocent girl, almost like the biblical Virgin Mary.*

GC: Yes, she's very innocent, wearing a flowery baby blue kids-style tank top. She is also an advocating Christian. It's funny how it immediately points to this idea of the Virgin Mary. She's influential, and those figures have been overlooked.

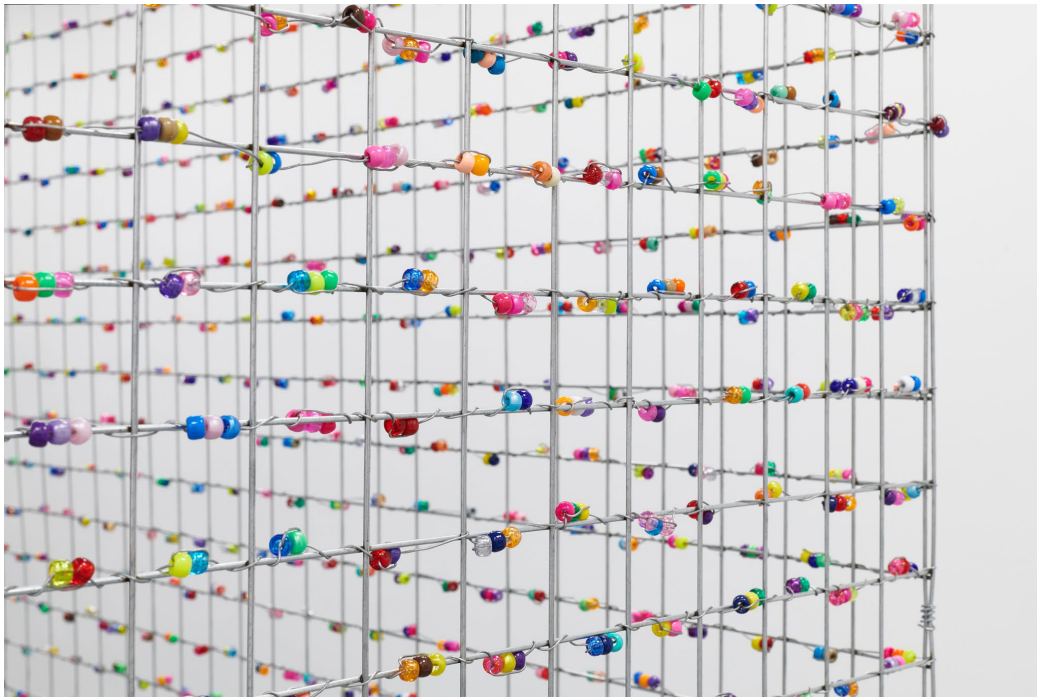
NG: *It's this soft power that so many influencers and celebrities have, and that has been widely used in marketing and online tactics of brands, but also in creating celebrities as brands.*

There is also another element to your show, which is the big cage that you've constructed out of metal wire and colourful beads. You can go inside and see the works through it too. Can you tell me about that work?

GC: I recently got very interested in the beads as material. I was thinking of childhood accessories, of making bracelets and necklaces. I'm very interested in accessories – the idea of decorating things, how it's been defined as a feminine practice and associated with women, and so, deemed superfluous or not-so-valuable. It was interesting to explore the idea of decorating something that is confining you, which I feel is very related to how we live in a society. I started using this material in works of a smaller scale and then suddenly saw everything through these structures of beaded wire. I really enjoyed that, because it was changing my perspective of looking at my paintings and other works. The cage in the exhibition is positioning you in a way that changes your experience of things.

As soon as a material comes into my vocabulary, then it goes into very different pieces. Because it's around me, it spreads and very much enters my mind. I'm probably going to use beads for a while, because I feel they have so much potential. In the smaller sculptures the beads almost become lights, or create this merry-go-round, so they have a very different feel.

NG: *Are there any artists or writers that have been particularly influential to your work?*



Guendalina Cerruti, 'Ohh... Youth!'; Installation View.

GC: In relation to this exhibition, I've been very impacted by Gina Beavers and her very material paintings of pop imagery. There is so much greed, make-up and food that is very distasteful. I really enjoy looking at that work, and I would like mine to have that intensity, presence and very unapologetic vision.

Mike Kelley is an artist that I really love and the title of the exhibition references his work *Ahh... Youth* (1991). It's a series of photographs of stuffed toys and an image of Mike Kelley in it – it was very much exploring this idea of shared pain, trauma and empathy. The discourse around empathy and childhood, and the relationship between childhood and adulthood in his work was very important. By appropriating the title I was interested in the question of how you would portray the idea of shared trauma today.