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Art in America  
St. Petersburg Paradox/Amalia Ulman  
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## Art in America

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### The New New Face: Amalia Ulman

by Matthew Shen Goodman



Amalia Ulman, *Best Wishes (Ambition)*, 2014, found Russian birthday cards, digital prints face-mounted to acrylic, 59 by 43 3/4 inches. Courtesy the artist.



Her practice a diverse mix of painting, sculpture, phone apps and Skype lectures, artist Amalia Ulman is a keen explorer of what she describes as the "bland" or "middlebrow" aesthetic. Usually dominated by a color palette of whites, beiges and tans, her work sneaks knotty questions about class and gender into seemingly unobtrusive and generically pleasing visual compositions. Having recently had solo shows at LTD Los Angeles and Smart Objects, also in L.A., where the Argentinian-born, Spanish-raised artist recently moved, Ulman is also one of the artists featured in "The St. Petersburg Paradox" (through Aug. 17), a group show at New York's Swiss Institute that examines questions of business, chance and value stemming from the famous economics thought experiment.

In addition to her contribution, *Best Wishes (Ambition)*, 2014, a pair of digital prints of Russian birthday cards expressing high hopes for the recipient's financial success, Ulman will be in conversation with renowned plastic surgeon Fredric Brandt at the Swiss Institute this evening, June 4th. A well-known collector of contemporary art, Brandt is the pioneer of the now dominant approach that's been described as the **New New Face**: the use of Botox and fillers in techniques that are far less invasive than the nip-and-tucks and face lifts of yore to achieve a visage that's youthfully rounded and (relatively) natural-seeming.

In advance of the event, Ulman spoke with *A.I.A.* over Skype and e-mail, discussing retro luxury, French artist and plastic surgery enthusiast Orlan, and Ulman's plans for the discussion with Brandt.

**MATTHEW SHEN GOODMAN** With your work in the Swiss Institute exhibition, were you responding to the theme? Or had the works already been made?

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**AMALIA ULMAN** It's funny—even though it was a group show the topics were really close to my own practice, which is why Simon [Castets, director of the Swiss Institute] thought of me. I had gone to a Russian bookstore in L.A., right across from where I was having a solo show at the time ["Used & New" at LTD Los Angeles] and I found all of these postcards. I was fascinated by their design but I didn't know what to do with them, so I just kept them and took them back home to Spain with me.

They are mostly birthday messages—to a son, to a husband, to a brother—with a very defined (and passé) idea of masculinity and success: the iPhone, the credit card, the sports car, the suit. I imagine a mother wishing her son to do well, and it's this particular notion of prosperity that I always found very interesting because it's kind of retro. There is something that I tend to romanticize in these outmoded ideals of luxury.

A few weeks later Simon approached me with this show titled "The St. Petersburg Paradox," on value and economics, and I thought, "Well, we have something here!"

**SHEN GOODMAN** It reminded me of your Skype lecture *Buyer walker rover* (2013), which describes a kind of flâneurship centered around walking through a city and window shopping and staring at commodities—there's a sociological aspect to your work that's always foregrounded, but usually without the presence of any actual bodies. It's sociology without people in it.

**ULMAN** Well, I've always been very shy when it comes to approaching people (and that's why I've mostly depicted myself if I ever needed to use a human figure). Commodities and their arrangement define humans. Staring at objects, trends and aesthetics, I get to understand contemporary lifestyles more than by talking to people, which I find very difficult.

That said, I barely have any possessions because I don't find pleasure in owning as much as in looking and learning. I keep a photographic archive of all these items.

**SHEN GOODMAN** What in particular interests you about plastic surgery?

**ULMAN** I'm always fascinated by what's meant to be beautiful now in comparison to what was thought to be beautiful 10 years ago. Because I usually like what is considered ugly. The body as object is the ultimate commodification and, going one step further from previous research like *Buyer walker rover*, the physicalities of the human body have become my primary field of study.

The other day, I was watching [British interviewer] Amanda de Cadenet in conversation with [actress] Zoe Saldana, who said, "The same way an old man has a mid-life crisis and buys a Porsche and dates a 17-year-old, I can buy myself a pair of titties and be the sexiest soccer mom that you've ever seen." She said it in a positive and supposedly empowering way, but that analogy is just so wrong. The female equivalent to buying a car is to go through a surgery that requires general anesthetic and implants underneath the pectoral muscles? And, while I'm all for body modification,

comments like this one exemplify how fucked up things are. I'm very intrigued by the relationship between female bodies and pain, and how the latter is taken for granted.

**SHEN GOODMAN** Have you ever considered, for personal or artistic reasons, some sort of plastic surgery?

**ULMAN** Yeah, definitely. Mostly for artistic reasons. My first contact with contemporary art was when I was eight. I saw one of Orlan's performances at four in the morning on a very obscure Spanish television program about "culture." The thing is that they showed this surgery and explained it was art, which disgusted me but at the same time really attracted me, and it was stuck in my mind forever.

But now that you mention it, tomorrow I'm getting fillers underneath my eyes and a nonsurgical nose job in Beverly Hills. It doesn't even require anesthetic, which is something I'm very interested in as an artist—all of these previous artistic approaches were very kitsch, bloody and extreme, very David LaChapelle, Orlan, Stelarc. I would like to approach it from the point of view of blandness, which is a continuation of previous artworks of mine "elegant." What I'm getting done tomorrow, it's super mild. You don't even notice it. It's like the wavy willows of cosmetic procedures.

**SHEN GOODMAN** Is it reversible?

**ULMAN** It wears off in a year. I find this whole idea of the fake natural very interesting, doing all these procedures, spending all this money, but basically having your look remain the same. It's funny, if you go to the before and after section on this doctor's website everyone looks identical. The techniques are so minimal. It's like painting the upper frieze of a white wall in a light toasted color.

**SHEN GOODMAN** What do you have planned for your conversation with Fredric Brandt?

**ULMAN** I want to talk about ideas regarding self-representation, value, sexuality, gender and race. How many racialized procedures are often wrongly called "corrective surgeries," as if Westernization of the face was the right (and only) way to go—how Asian girls want larger nasal bridges to look more Caucasian, in opposition to the '80s trend of Jewish girls filing their noses down, for example. I also want to discuss the malleability of the gaze and how people realize their imagined idea of themselves, either through physical interventions like surgery or exercise, or, in today's electronic economy of looking good, Photoshop.

Finally, I'd like to ask him if he thinks that whatever I'm getting on my face has been a good job, and what would he do to make me "better."