

CONVERSATIONS

Hazmat: Charlie Fox and Marianna Simnett

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Charlie Fox, author of *This Young Monster* talks to artist Marianna Simnett about her latest project *Worst Gift* currently showing at [Matt's Gallery](#), London. They talk about medical fairy tales, viral infections, and killing the audience.

Charlie Fox: Can we talk about intimacy and perversions of intimacy? I think that's what I called them in the essay: areas of the body that maybe we don't get to explore or visit that are being kind of fed upon and chewed up.

Marianna Simnett: It starts with an exploration of parts you can't see without an aid or an other. Horror Zones. Like the back of the knee in *Blue Roses* or the tip of the nose in *The Udder*. And then I like to look inside and see what you're not normally allowed to see.

CF: Like a voyeur in this weird medical context.

MS: Yeah. Piercing what seems rigid or solid or performing mutations of bodies and gender. The needle in *The Needle and the Larynx* is kind of like the larynx's lover and stabber. All these contradictions pour out from a pinprick.

CF: With *Worst Gift* where do you see that stuff going on? It's mutated again. Also the factory is another strange space that you wouldn't get to experience ordinarily.

MS: Getting past Botox security was difficult. Those places have strict measures to stave off germ-people. You have to wear about ten layers of plastic protection, your body is sealed in. But I feel like we should be allowed access to substances that are put inside us.

CF: There's something delicious, a kind of compulsive thing about that violation, getting into those little spaces and wrecking those creepy thresholds. Does it start as a shiver or some kind of impulse, saying "I wanna be in there"?

MS: Yeah. Also breaking down what seems to be impenetrable. I convinced all these medical executives to let me through yet I didn't know where I was going.

CF: Whoa. It's a kind of like an *Alice in Wonderland* moment. Alice encounters these creatures—the caterpillar, the Red Queen, the Cheshire Cat—and answers these questions. She's tested to get through to the next part of the environment. And it feels illicit and magic, seeing you warp that educational fairy tale structure into something medical, biological, chrome. I wanted to ask, have you ever used an endoscopic camera, or anything like that?

MS: Have I controlled one? No. I've had one in my own body and the surgeon uses it to cut off a piece of the young girl's nose in *Blood*. I love those shots, they're amazing, endoscopic views of your body.

CF: They turn your body into this otherworldly swamp. And everything oozes together in your work, like a body. You have the sores on the faces in *Worst Gift*, and sores in *The Udder*, mastitis recurs, blood, metamorphosis, fables everywhere. There are these motifs, these viruses that can't be shaken off.

MS: Between the works?

CF: Yup.

MS: Hazmat.

CF: Hazmat! Yeah, hazmat goo.

MS: Each work leaks into the next, feeds off the thing before.

CF: Because the worm's a fascinating thing, you know when you have that amazing body-horror moment? But it doesn't feel like a Cronenberg-ish or *Alien* chest-bursting, it's beautiful, how the worm comes out.

MS: But you're a tough audience, because you're used to most disgusting things.

CF: I'm well versed in disgusting things, disgusting scenes, but I think that moment is a kind of twisting on *Snow White*: the worm inside the apple that sends her to sleep.

MS: The cyanide.

CF: I want there to be a worm in there. I don't know if there is but I feel like there should be and I feel like is this something you feel, too, like there's a worm inside *Worst Gift*?

MS: Totally. It glides, like a violence that works on you gently, which is a creepy way of talking about violence. It buries itself in your brain and then slithers out again.

CF: Like an infection, it begins its work and when you look down and there's something *growing* on you that you didn't even notice before.



1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11
Marianna Simnett, *Worst Gift* (still), 2017
© Marianna Simnett. Courtesy: the artist and Matt's Gallery



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Marianna Simnett, *Worst Gift* (still), 2017
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MS: I never want the characters in my work to be culpable. If the girl wants to peck the dick off the guard and calls on the birds to help her, she isn't powerful enough to simply call the birds. She needs the worm to help her because then the birds want the worm. It's about cursing collaboratively. All the offenders—worm, bird, girl—are just accomplices. They're blinded by their own evil eyes. It's as if the crime already existed way before they were chosen to perform it.

CF: Is it like a curse on the audience? Do you want it to have a gut-level impact on the audience? That they get infected with this too...

MS: I hope so, definitely.

CF: Because all the time I was watching [*Worst Gift*], I'd have dreams about it. It would go straight into my head and re-spawn, like, I'd dream about flesh melting off my arm or my voice sounding like DJ Screw or... my mouth and my voice being totally out of sync, awkwardly dubbed. *Worst Gift* really got into me like this fluid, an infectious fluid.

MS: The best work starts when you leave the room. But I am also a big fan of work being entertaining.

CF: And if you're entertaining anybody, you're lulling them into this sinister state. You make people vulnerable, entranced, numb: something bad could happen to them.

MS: Because they wouldn't notice if something was there.

CF: Because they're too caught up in being seduced.

MS: Why do we want to kill the audience?

CF: There's something super-attractive about killing the audience, isn't there? It's the ultimate if they're just sitting there, bewitched. It's a power thing. But not just that.

MS: It's like that story, when the ceiling collapsed on top of the audience in The Apollo Theatre.

CF: There's something amazing about that idea of destroying the theatre, too. It's the ultimate thing, to blow it all up, like there's this Sid Vicious video where he shoots the audience, singing "My Way." That's a great moment in perversions of the musical. If you can do a violent musical, that's a wonderful thing. Let's talk about *mutational falsetto* as an underpinning for *Worst Gift*. I love that phrase, I just think it sounds amazing. That and—what's the other one?—"puberphonia"?

MS: Yeah, "puberphonia": it's a rare condition where men speak in a high voice beyond puberty. No one really understands because their bodies are biologically able to go low but refuse to for some reason. It's the body acting out of turn, or resisting.

CF: Like the body is staying outside when it should be indoors. It's too unruly, it just doesn't come back home.

MS: And then a patient told me that once he had learnt his new, low voice he couldn't undo it.

CF: Yikes, like a bad dream. There's this record of people speaking without larynxes [*Speech After Removal of the Larynx*, Folkways, 1964] and it's incredible, it sounds like a gnarly synthesizer. Doctors teach their patients to belch and make these frog noises as the replacement for speech. It's like *The Exorcist* school of communication. I wanted to ask you about music because the structure of the piece is musical, you have an overture, an intermezzo, uh, interlude kind of thing.

MS: The music is meant to feel like a substance moving slowly round your body. There's Declan's beautiful tenor voice and all these sliding highs to lows of the teenage boys having their voices lowered. The *Sick Rose* song was like a love duet between the girl and the surgeon. "Take a little bit of girl, dress her like a sick rose, add some tears to her eyes, make her cry for a dose." It's a way of adding humour. Relaxing into the song.

CF: It's like *The Singing Detective*, you just crave the music, like a narcotic.

MS: Lucinda Chua wrote that track with me. It goes up and up and up: "High enough to hide the blame, high enough to bide the pain." There's no conclusion.

CF: The song freaks me out in the best way: I don't know where I am or what it is I'm watching anymore. Suddenly we're in this musical. That's what's really intoxicating about it to me: you're on this unstable ground, shifting things going on all the time while you're being ravished. You don't know how you're supposed to feel about it.

MS: That's probably because I'm on unstable ground while I'm writing it. It comes from hating and distrusting and finally loving so hard that you're squeezing and smashing. That's my process, it's quite intense, the way I accumulate all of this material and make it into something.

CF: Like a poison you grow to love, a parasite that you're eager to keep and nourish but then you have to expel. Traumatic. You disappear in the factory— what was the exciting thing about vanishing?

MS: I wanted to play dead. The girl can die, come back to life and keep dying.

Marianna Simnett is a London-based artist working with moving image, installation and performance. Her recent work explores female subjectivity and bodily integrity as they relate to the power dynamics of the medical profession. Recent solo exhibitions and screenings include: *Worst Gift*, Matt's Gallery, London, 2017; *Lies*, Seventeen, New York, 2016; *Valves Collapse*, Seventeen, London, 2016; *Blue Roses*, Park Nights, Serpentine Galleries, London, 2015. Simnett won the Jerwood / FVU Award in 2015 and is shortlisted for the Jarman Award 2017.

Charlie Fox is a writer who lives in London. His work has appeared in many publications including *frieze*, *Artforum*, *The White Review* and *The New York Times*. His debut book, *This Young Monster*, which John Waters called 'a breath of proudly purified air', is published by Fitzcarraldo Editions.



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Marianna Simnett, *Worst Gift* (still), 2017
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