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CHAMPAGNE LIFE: THE SAATCHI GALLERY'S FIRST ALL-FEMALE SHOW

By: Mandy Hegarty



For the Saatchi Gallery in London, this year is a landmark one: it's the venue's 30th anniversary. Birthdays call for celebrations, of course, and the Saatchi Gallery kicked off the festivities with their first-ever all female show, *Champagne Life*. Fourteen international artists feature in the exhibition, though a quick walk through reveals that gender and occupation are about all that they have in common.

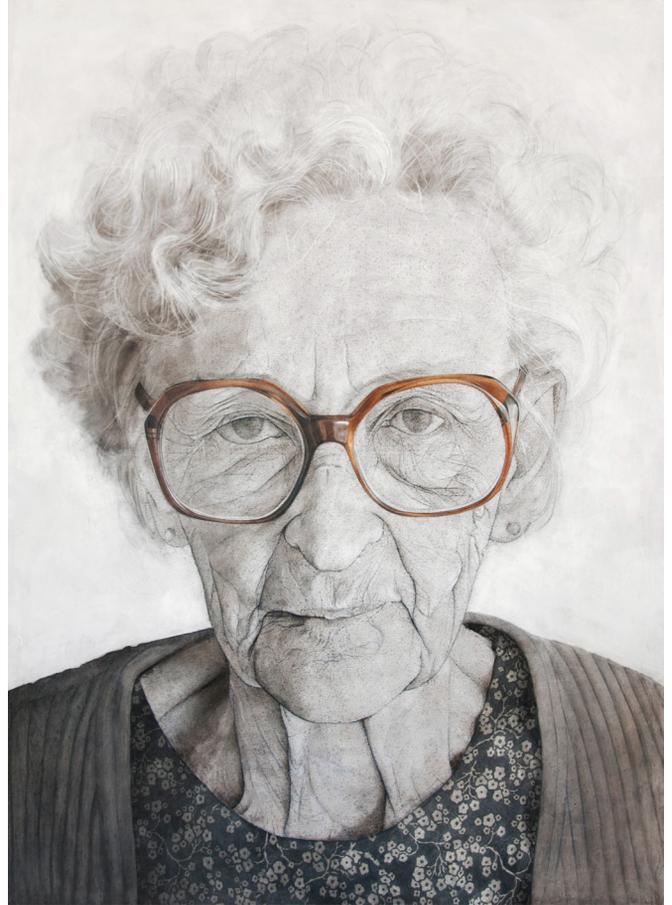
Just five of the artists are given a full room unto themselves, but even where two or three share a space, the capacious

galleries seem to encourage viewers to engage with each artist's work individually, rather than trying to draw dubious connections between them.

Only one of the gallery's enormous white rooms – that containing Mia Feuer's papier-mâché "Jerusalem Donkey," a wall covered with charred pots and pans courtesy of Saudi artist Maha Malluh and Iranian-born Soheila Sokhanvari's taxidermy horse, which sits astride a deflated balloon – has a loosely unifying theme of sorts: all three pieces here point toward the Middle East.

LEFT:
Rhyme Sequence Wiggly Waggle by
Mequitta Ahuja

OPPOSITE,
CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:
Grozda by Jelena Bulajic (2014);
Ljubica by Jelena Bulajic (2012);
Champagne Life Installation View -
Image courtesy of the Saatchi Gallery,
London (c) Stephen White 2015





Sharing another gallery are French sculptor Virgile Ittah's life-size wax figures, who slump, seemingly melting, over the side of iron bed frames. They are overlooked by extraordinarily detailed, gray-scale portraits. Every furrow, shadow and mark of experience on these worn-and-torn faces is impeccably rendered by Serbian painter Jelena Bulajić.

The show draws its title from one of American artist's Julia Wachtel's pop-inspired paintings, which fill the entire first gallery. Here hang a series of grainy, Google-sourced photographic silkscreens of celebrities and violent scenes, all divided into vertical strips and interspersed with colorful cartoon characters. "I'm basically putting myself in the kind of topsy-turvy world of oversaturation and image production, and trying to create a destabilized, nervous emotional position in respect to that space," Wachtel tells *Private Air Luxury Homes Magazine*.

This gallery is home to the exhibition's titular work, "*Champagne Life*," a canvas upon which repeated images of

Hollywood's golden couple du jour, Kim Kardashian and Kanye West, are flipped upside down and spliced with paintings of a sky-blue Minnie Mouse figurine. It's an absurd, provocative coupling and a blunt statement on celebrity and consumer culture. So why Kim? "With Kim Kardashian, she for me, represents almost pure superficiality and the idea of exteriority," explains Wachtel. "She is a Möbius strip of exteriority: you can never get inside, there is no content. It is only about the surface. And that is the content of the surface. So I thought she's perfect, because paintings are surfaces. That is what you are dealing with – pure surface."

The two Minnies on the large "*Champagne Life*" canvas are hand-painted and therefore, not identical. "Repetition is the logic of the media. But I am not a machine...." says Wachtel. "I've always hand-painted them because I feel like I need to make my own personal investment. It's like a pilgrimage to the altar of representation that I'm going to invest my time and recreate these images and not just mechanically reproduce them." ➤

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:
Echoué au seuil de la raison by Virgile Ittah (2014)
Jerusalem Donkey by Mia Feuer (2015)
Two Cows by Stephanie Quayle
Maitreya by Seung Ah Paik (2013)