

Interview



By KERSTIN BRATSCH
Photography GREGORY HARRIS

For her upcoming solo show at New York's [47 Canal](#) next month, artist Michele Abeles is considering incorporating a clear resin sculpture she produced two years ago of her hand clasping a knife with its blade projecting through the center hole of a DVD. For those with experience in skirting copyright laws, the sculpture might be familiar: It refers to the icon for the MacTheRipper software, a free downloadable tool that, among other boons, defeats merchandise encryption and removes copy protections and regional restrictions from films. The New York-born Abeles, who keeps a studio in Crown Heights, Brooklyn, is thinking of inserting the sculpture through one of her

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elaborate photographic images—the hand, knife, and DVD projecting out from the frame. Of course, in most of Abeles's photo-based works there is an artful MacTheRipper-esque stripping of protected borders at play.

Abeles came to wider attention at PS1's "Greater New York" show in 2010, with her flattened, sharply lit photo montages that incorporated still lifes (plant, table), nudes (shaved male body being blown on by a fan), portraits (close-up of man wearing reflective sunglasses), and animal shots made to look like stock images (two



black dogs that blend eerily into their background), all of which seemed to be systematically stripping photography of its expected terms and conceits. Her work involves a process in perpetual motion and modulation. She shoots anonymous models, uses gels over lenses, is no stranger to the Google image search, synchronizes different elements in Photoshop, and, for her latest series of works, is experimenting with clear film run through inkjet printers (a process similar to that used commercially for product displays). The result is a vertiginous spatial dislocation—and since we have become so moored to our system of understanding the world through photographs, a kind of rupture or confusion about whether we are supposed to be attracted or repulsed, comforted or confronted, by the collapsed spaces and aggressive cuts that Abeles makes across her surfaces.

German artist Kerstin Brätsch recently sat down with Abeles to drink tea and discuss whatever came their way as the recorder did its job of recording.

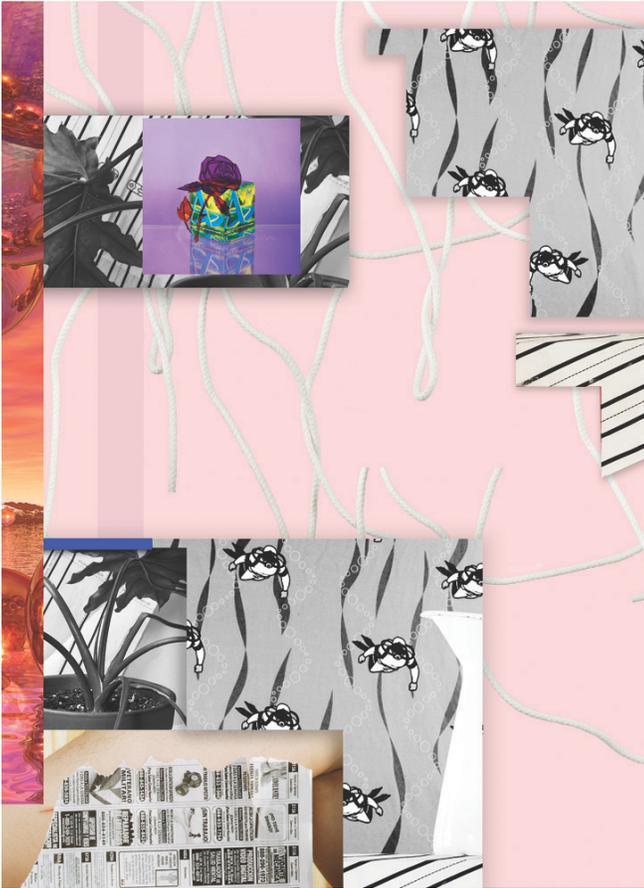
KERSTIN BRÄTSCH: It's interesting that we're doing this conversation for *Interview*, because you did a rather Warholian move when you were nominated for Rob Pruitt's Art Awards in 2010. You sent the celebrity actress Paz de la Huerta in your place, as your ghost, instead of attending yourself. Do you believe in ghosts?

MICHELE ABELES: Yeah, I'm interested in some sort of spectral in-betweenness. But that's a difficult question, because you're asking a ghost whether she believes in ghosts. *[laughs]* Actually, right after I was born, my great uncle Joe had somebody do my astrological chart. My uncle was a photographer in New York. He worked in the theater world, doing studio portraits for people such as Marlon Brando, James Dean, Christopher Walken . . .

He actually did a well-known profile picture of James Dean. Anyway, the astrological reading predicted up until I was 23 years old, and it was really accurate. Except the astrologer said that I'd be an actress, which was something that completely horrified my uncle.

BRÄTSCH: That's especially funny because of the Paz thing. It's like you became invisible by sending a Hollywood actress in place of yourself. Paz erased you, playing the role of Michele Abeles. It's a double negative.

ABELES: That's true, but isn't what you see what you get?



BRÄTSCH: Duchamp once said, “The only solution for the great man of tomorrow is to go underground.”

ABELES: But isn't celebrity essentially invisible? They're stock images—generic, reproducible, disposable. I was trying to figure out why I would send somebody to go as me to these awards, and I thought, What would be more perfect than having a celebrity attend in my place to kind of make myself invisible. So in a sense, you're right about Duchamp. Doing that allowed me to go underground. When you image-search Paz on the internet, she looks completely different from picture to picture. It's really hard to pin her down as a person.

BRÄTSCH: If you look at the red-carpet photos from the Art Awards, there she is, and the caption has your name.

ABELES: I wanted there to be this confusion.

BRÄTSCH: It's a nice schizophrenia of images, I would say. Because it makes identifying Michele Abeles, as a commodified person, totally impossible. You become a complete blank. The blankness reminds me of the transparent sculpture you showed me—the one based on the computer icon for MacTheRipper. In that work, I feel like your hand almost becomes Jack the Ripper's hand. Installed on the wall, it becomes a hybrid image-sculpture, but almost like a zombie who stepped out of virtual space into reality.

ABELES: It's funny, I never made that connection. I was actually working on that resin piece around the time of the Art Awards. But MacTheRipper is like the virtual bootleg version of Jack the Ripper. Nobody ever discovered his identity either. This piece is like a back-and-forth with the

body interacting between real and false space. It has a weightlessness.

BRÄTSCH: Like Rubber Man [Mister Fantastic] from the Fantastic Four? [*Abeles laughs*] Won't they take a photo of you for this article? Won't that ruin your invisible cloak?

ABELES: I hope not. There is an idea of looking the part. When I see a photograph of somebody like Iggy Pop, I say to myself, "Yeah, that's totally rock-'n'-roll."

BRÄTSCH: Stomach muscles.

ABELES: Yeah. But what should an artist look like? Like Picasso? Pollock? Did Andy Warhol look like an artist?

BRÄTSCH: Like Jackson Pollock with a whiskey bottle.

ABELES: Exactly. That sounds like a still life. Does Hunter S. Thompson look like a writer of hardboiled journalism? How great does Samuel Beckett look?

BRÄTSCH: Or James Joyce with that eye patch. I want to ask you how you prepare for a typical photo shoot.

ABELES: I don't do typical photo shoots.

BRÄTSCH: Then how do you prepare for a photo shoot?

ABELES: I don't. A lot of what I do comes from how I get along with my camera. People always say that you can't change the Bible and you can't change Shakespeare. But me? I always change things. I have to. I'm just like that.

BRÄTSCH: Have you ever worked on a project with a genius?

ABELES: A genius? *Genius* is just a word, and words block meanings. Words have lost their value today, don't you think? People don't communicate what they mean. If someone tells me, "This coffee is genius," what does that mean? If coffee can be genius, what does genius mean anymore? If someone says, "Have a Coke and smile," I'm going to have a Coke and it's going to hurt my stomach. It's going to make me sick.

BRÄTSCH: Is there any question that could potentially make you feel sick?

ABELES: "Tell me about the style of your work."

BRÄTSCH: Okay, tell me about the style of your work.

ABELES: It's just the way I perceive the world. I have a kind of nervousness that leads to rapid juxtapositions. It's not so different from punk rock. You scream, but you modulate a little.

BRÄTSCH: It's kind of like a reversal of hierarchies—say, from object over image or from image over object. Or you could even say the finite over the infinite. I think reversals like that mean to address displacement and linkage. Though they're all highly related. It's been entirely transcended and totally transposed. That is the contradiction and the paradox.

ABELES: If you use source work as a catalyst, you throw out its representation. You move away from the source.

BRÄTSCH: I guess once you do that, you can start talking about the understructure. It seems simple at first, but it's always the simple things that work.

ABELES: Yes. A lot of my work is completely intuitive.

BRÄTSCH: Intuition is the fire that triggers the intellect. Do you want more tea?

ABELES: What kind of tea is this?

BRÄTSCH: It's just black tea.

ABELES: Oh, I thought it was going to be special German tea.

BRÄTSCH: You know, in Germany—a very stupid country—critics there tried to label me like the female expressionist painter, but I elude them. I once refused many roles because I didn't want to be typecast. I would sign a little piece of paper and find out later that I signed five. I never read the contracts.

ABELES: You have to read your contracts.

BRÄTSCH: I worked that way because I didn't care. A girl on the street doesn't care what she steals—the point is to steal something.

ABELES: That's true. I've actually never cared more or less. It's always been the same. This is how I think of it: Let's say there is a hand that plays the violin excellently. That hand belongs to the world's greatest violinist. But this violinist finds herself out of work. So somebody says, "I don't have a job for a violinist, but I do have a job for someone willing to carry out the trash." So the violinist takes the job. Although her hand is forced to carry garbage, that doesn't diminish the skill of the hand. Speaking of skill, what do you think of the de-skilled or un-skilled hand in painting?

BRÄTSCH: Well, painting is like the senile grandmother in the family, right? She's been crazy for a long time. She urinates and defecates, but everyone in her family knows how to treat her, how to talk to her. No one is surprised at what she does—Oh my god, my nose is bleeding. [*wipes nose with tissue*] Suppose a collector walked into this room right now and said, "Michele, I have \$15 million."

ABELES: I'd say, "Give it to me, in cash, please."

BRÄTSCH: Yes! I am a man, too! [*laughs*] It's quite true. I, too, just mean well for humanity. I'm not a proper painter or a proper sculptor. I only look at all of this from the outside, and I make an occasional intervention. Or I try to do my bit as best as I can. I don't aim to provoke people. I just try to appease them. How do you react when a model shows up to your studio and you realize it's a real dog?

ABELES: I first try to burn down the studio! No, seriously, there is no initial visual reaction. It's more something you feel deep down inside. You can try as hard as you can on certain shoots, but it never works when you're working with a difficult model.

BRÄTSCH: Are you as difficult to work with as people say?

ABELES: Me? No. Look, I've been working a long time on my own, and you just know some things after a while. You can't always explain things to other people. So during photo shoots, you'll see certain things about the lighting, and you'll notice that someone is positioning their body wrong, and you'll ask, "What are you doing this for?" Then if they don't get it, I might ask, "Would you like my ass in front of you? If you like it that much, why don't you just photograph my ass?"

BRÄTSCH: Do you dislike Andy Warhol?

ABELES: No! That's a funny train of thought. He was a highly talented guy. He did very good movies, and he wasn't the sort of person who always talked bullshit. He did many, many things right, but he's also sick. I think he wanted to make history more than he wanted to make movies, and anyone who wants to make history is stupid.

BRÄTSCH: Let's play "Who would you do?" Who would you do: Starbucks or the Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf?

ABELES: That's a hard one. Starbucks is so ubiquitous, but then the Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf is so L.A.

BRÄTSCH: Your choice, but you have to make one.

ABELES: Okay, the Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf.

BRÄTSCH: Kate Moss or Naomi Campbell?

ABELES: Definitely Naomi Campbell.

BRÄTSCH: Rafael Nadal or Ivan Lendl?

ABELES: Hmm . . .

BRÄTSCH: Come on, that's obvious.

ABELES: Lendl.

BRÄTSCH: Hulk Hogan or Dolph Lundgren?

ABELES: Obviously, Dolph Lundgren. He's timeless.

BRÄTSCH: Andy Kaufman or Jerry Lewis?

ABELES: Uh, Andy Kaufman.

BRÄTSCH: Another thing I wanted to ask you is that I notice a distance in your work.

ABELES: Other people have mentioned that to me, about distance. Sometimes to look at something, you have to go very far back in order to have the possibility of seeing it. If you get too close, like in advertising, you're so close that you don't really see the image anymore. Sometimes, even in a love affair, you have to put some distance between you and your lover to discover the love

again.

BRÄTSCH: Often it looks like your camera got loose in the middle of the conversation.

ABELES: Oh cool. I like that.

BRÄTSCH: You've talked to me before about the space between two characters, about Velázquez being more interested in the space between people than the people themselves.

ABELES: Communication is what's between, right? I think to go between is the only way to go to the people. This tape recorder is between us—it's because of that that we can talk. I use an image like a train to go from one station to another. I think the images are like the train, not the station. In fact, I feel myself being more of the train and less of the station, and I've now realized that that's why I'm less anguished at this point in my life—because I'm not waiting for the train.

BRÄTSCH: *[laughs]* That's good, especially in New York. You moved to New York early in your career, right, in 2004? What effect did that have on you and your work?

ABELES: I thought New York was beautiful. A cruel beauty. Blue sky, white light, skyscrapers . . .

BRÄTSCH: Well, we could talk about cybernetic imposition. Or place in terms of space as objects. Or we could talk about final articulation of origins.

ABELES: Sure, but I never work by variations. Formal developments have never appealed to me. My photos each fill a hole—what I think of as the hole of the unfamiliar or even the hole of the unknown. I'm not really interested in any endgame discussions.

BRÄTSCH: There's a long tradition of endgame art, starting from Dada or the Suprematists. A lot of artists have made the last painting ever to be made. I guess it's a no-man's land that a lot of us are enjoying moving around in. But in the end it's only art, right?

ABELES: It is only art. *[laughs]*

BRÄTSCH: Do you enjoy creating your photos?

ABELES: Oh yeah, I love it. It's a real turn-on, Kerstin.

BRÄTSCH: What does your father do?

ABELES: He's retired, but he used to work for the government at the National Institutes of Health. He was always vague in his explanation of what he did. I guess because it was a government job. And honestly, some of the things he did tell me were so over-the-top, I often wondered if they were lies or just in his head. I do know part of his work and what he was interested in was applying the physical facts of the environment on people. It was something he called the Third Revolution. He would say that facts are the things that have come after the consumerism of the Post-industrial Revolution.

BRÄTSCH: In other words?

ABELES: He produced ways to invade people's lives with the very products they consume.

BRÄTSCH: You mean, he modifies the behavior of a particular group of people by what they consume?

ABELES: Exactly. He used things like TVs, microchips, computers, chemicals . . . Even tape recorders and cameras. He just knew how to undermine your situation with what you think you already own and what you think you might control.

BRÄTSCH: Say, for instance, the film in your camera.

ABELES: If I was still using film . . . But, say, back when people took their snapshots to the lab to get developed, he could easily dismantle the convention of getting back your snapshots by infusing your pictures with the element of imagination.

BRÄTSCH: What kind of element, for example?

ABELES: Okay, a different example: I remember during the 2008 election, he told me that he planned to somehow prescribe a type of contact lens for John McCain. [*laughs*] It's actually really funny. He wanted to make these lenses that would produce dystopia. Imagine McCain putting on a shirt and thinking the shirt was alive. Obviously sometimes his ideas were outlandishly absurd. And my never knowing when to take him seriously was part of his design.

BRÄTSCH: Let's go back to what we talked about at the beginning—ghosts and zombies. Have you ever been to a psychic?

ABELES: I have talked on the phone with an animal psychic.

BRÄTSCH: Really?

ABELES: My dog used to bark all the time, whenever I would leave—if it was 10 minutes or a whole day, just bark the whole time. It was really loud, so a lot of my neighbors in the different buildings I lived in would try to get me evicted, which was totally reasonable. But it was also really stressful, because there would always be these horrible notes on my door whenever I'd get home. I tried training her but it never worked. I just wanted to know why she was barking so much. I can't remember if a friend gave me the name or if I discovered her on the internet, but I found this pet psychic who I think lived in Missouri. The way it worked is we made an appointment, and she would call me and I would just have to be in a room with my dog while we were on the phone. Then, essentially, she would psychically connect with my dog—or maybe it's telepathically, I don't know—and I would ask her a question that I wanted to ask my dog, and she would telepathically ask my dog the question for me. Then she would tell me what my dog said.

BRÄTSCH: What did he say?

ABELES: Well, it was all really obvious answers until she got to the part about why my dog was barking so much. My dog's answer was: "It's just what I do."

KERSTIN BRÄTSCH, BORN IN HAMBURG, CURRENTLY LIVES AND WORKS IN NEW YORK CITY AND BERLIN. SHE IS A FOUNDER, WITH ADELE RODER, OF THE ARTIST COLLECTIVE DAS INSTITUT.